THE YOUNG
ENCHANTED
HIGHWAYMAN

a. l. B
from
E. J. C. M
Jan 1st 192

BOOKS BY HUGH WALPOLE

NOVELS

THE WOODEN HORSE
MR. PERRIN AND MR. TRAILL
THE GREEN MIRROR
THE DARK FOREST
THE SECRET CITY
THE CAPTIVES

ROMANCES

MARADICK AT FORTY
THE PRELUDE TO ADVENTURE
FORTITUDE
THE DUCHESS OF WREXE
THE YOUNG ENCHANTED

BOOKS ABOUT CHILDREN

THE GOLDEN SCARECROW
JEREMY
JEREMY AND HAMLET
[In Preparation.

BELLES-LETTRES

JOSEPH CONRAD: A Critical Study

THE YOUNG ENCHANTED

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THE
YOUNG ENCHANTED

A ROMANTIC STORY

BY

HUGH WALPOLE

MACMILLAN AND CO., LIMITED
ST. MARTIN'S STREET, LONDON
1921

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TO MY FRIEND

LAURITZ MELCHIOR

AND, THROUGH HIM,

TO ALL MY FRIENDS IN DENMARK

THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED

This minute that comes
To me over the past
Decillions.
  There is no better than it
And now. What behaved well
In the past or behaves well
To-day is not such a wonder.
The wonder is always and
Always how there can be
A mean man or an infidel.

WALT WHITMAN.

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BOOK I

TWO DAYS

CHAPTER I

THE SCARLET FEATHER

Young Henry Trenchard, one fine afternoon in the Spring of 1920, had an amazing adventure.

He was standing at the edge of Piccadilly Circus, just in front of Swan and Edgar's where the omnibuses stopped. They now stop there no longer but take a last frenzied leap around the corner into Regent Street, greatly to the disappointment of many people who still linger at the old spot and have a vague sense all the rest of the day of having been cheated by the omnibus companies.

Henry generally paused there before crossing the Circus, partly because he was short-sighted and partly because he never became tired of the spectacle of life and excitement that Piccadilly Circus offered to him. His pince-nez, that never properly fitted his nose, always covered one eye more than the other and gave the interested spectator a dramatic sense of suspense because they seemed to be eternally at the crisis of falling to the ground, there to be smashed into a hundred pieces, these pince-nez coloured his whole life. Had he worn spectacles—large, round, moon-shaped ones as he should have done—he would have seen life steadily and seen it whole, but a kind of rather pathetic vanity—although he was not

really vain—prevented him from buying spectacles. The ill-balancing of these pince-nez is at the back of all those adventures of his that this book is going to record.

He waited, between the rushing of the omnibuses, for the right moment in which to cross, and while he waited a curious fancy occurred to him. This fancy had often occurred to him before, but he had never confessed it to any one—not even to Millicent—not because he was especially ashamed of it but because he was afraid that his audience would laugh at him, and if there was one thing at this time that Henry disliked it was to be laughed at.

He fancied, as he stood there, that his body swelled and swelled ; he grew, like 'Alice' in her Wonderland, into a gigantic creature, his neck shot up, his arms and his legs extended, his head was as high as the barber's window opposite, then slowly he raised his arm—like Gulliver, the crowds, the traffic, the buildings dwindled beneath him. Everything stopped ; even the sun stayed in its course and halted. The flower-women around the central statue sat with their hands folded, the policemen at the crossings waited, looking up to him as though for orders. The world stood still. With a great gesture, with all the sense of a mighty dramatic moment, he bade the centre of the Circus open. The Statue vanished, and in the place where it had been the stones rolled back, colour flamed into the sky, strange beautiful music was heard, and into the midst of that breathless pause there came forth—What ?

Alas, Henry did not know. It was here that the vision always stayed. At the instant when the ground opened, his size, his command, his force

collapsed. He fell with a bang to the ground, generally to find that some one was hitting him in the ribs, or stepping on his toes, or cursing him for being in the way.

Experience had, by this time, taught him that this always would be so, but he never surrendered hope. One day the vision would fulfil itself and then—well, he did not exactly know what would happen then.

To-day everything occurred as usual, and just as he came to ground some one struck him violently in the back with an umbrella. The jerk flung his glasses from his nose and he was only just in time to put out his hands and catch them. As he did this some books that he was carrying under his arm fell to the ground. He bent to pick them up and then was at once involved in the strangest medley of books and ankles and trouser-legs and the fringes of skirts. People pushed him and abused him. It was the busiest hour of the day and he was groping at the busiest part of the pavement. He had not had time to replace his pince-nez on his nose—they were reposing in his waistcoat pocket —and he was groping, therefore, in a darkened and confusing world. A large boot stamped on his fingers and he cried out ; some one knocked off his hat; some one else prodded him in the tenderest part of his back.

He was jerked on to his knees.

When he finally recovered himself and was once more standing, a man again amongst men, his pince-nez on his nose, he had his books under his arm, but his hat was gone, gone hopelessly, nowhere to be seen. It was not a very new hat—a dirty grey, and shapeless—but Henry, being in the first

weeks of his new independence, was poor, and a hat was a hat. He was supremely conscious of how foolish a man may look without a hat, and he hated to look foolish. He was also aware, out of the corner of his eye, that there was a smudge on one side of his nose. He could not tell whether it were a big or a little smudge, but from the corner of his eye it seemed gigantic.

Two of the books that he was carrying were books given him for review by the only paper in London—a small and insignificant paper—that showed interest in his literary judgement, and but a moment ago they had been splendid in their glittering and handsome freshness.

Now they were battered and dirty, and the corner of one of them was shapeless. One of the sources of his income was the sum that he received from a bookseller for his review copies ; he would never now receive a penny for either of these books.

There were tears in his eyes—how he hated the way that tears would come when he did not want them ! and he was muddy and hatless and lonely ! The loneliness was the worst ; he was in a hostile and jeering and violent world and there was no one who loved him.

They did not only not love him, they were also jeering at him, and this drove him at once to the determination to escape their company at all costs. No rushing omnibuses could stop him now, and he was about to plunge into the Piccadilly sea, hatless, muddy, bruised as he was, when the wonderful adventure occurred.

All his life after he would remember that moment, the soft blue sky shredded with pale flakes of rosy colour above him, the tall buildings

grey and pearl-white, the massed colour of the flowers round the statue, violets and daffodils and primroses, the whir of the traffic like an undertone of some symphony played by an unearthly orchestra far below the ground, the moving of the people about him as though they were all hurrying to find their places in some pageant that was just about to begin, the bells of St. James's Church striking five o'clock and the soft echo of Big Ben from the far distance, the warmth of the Spring sun and the fresh chill of the approaching evening, all these common, everyday things were, in retrospect, part of that wonderful moment as though they had been arranged for him by some kindly benignant power who wanted to give the best possible setting to the beginning of the great romance of his life.

He stood on the edge of the pavement, he made a step forward, and at that moment there arose, as it were from the very heart of the ground itself, a stout and, to Henry's delicate sense, a repulsive figure.

She was a woman wearing a round black hat and a black sealskin jacket ; her dress was of a light vivid green, her hair a peroxide yellow, and from her ears hung large glittering diamond earrings.

To a lead of the same bright green as her dress there was attached a small sniffing and supercilious Pomeranian. She was stout and red-faced : there was a general impression that she was very tightly bound about beneath the sealskin jacket. Her green skirt was shorter than her figure requested. Her thick legs showed fairly pink beneath very thin black stockings, light brown boots very tightly laced compressed her ankles until they bulged protestingly. All this, however, Henry did not

notice until later in the day when, as will soon be shown, he had ample opportunity for undisturbed observation.

His gaze was not upon the stout woman but upon the child who attended her. Child you could not perhaps truthfully call her ; she was at any rate not dressed as a child.

In contrast with the woman her clothes were quiet and well made, a dark dress with a little black hat whose only colour was a feather of flaming red. It was this feather that first caught Henry's eye. It was one of his misfortunes at this time that life was always suggesting to him literary allusions.

When he saw the feather he at once thought of Razkolnikov's Sonia. Perhaps not only the feather suggested the comparison. There was something simple and innocent and a little apprehensive that came at once from the girl's attitude, her hesitation as she stood just in front of Henry, the glance that she flung upon the Piccadilly cauldron before she stepped into it.

He saw very little of her face, although in retrospect it was impossible for him to believe that he had not seen her exactly as she was, soul and body, from the first instant glimpse of her ; it was pale, thin, her eyes large and dark, and even in that first moment very beautiful.

He had not, of course, any time to see these things. He filled in the picture afterwards. Exactly what occurred was that the diamond earrings flashed before him, the thick legs stepped into the space between two omnibuses, there was a shout from a driver, and for a horrible moment it seemed that both the girl and the supercilious Pomeranian had been run over. Henry dashed forward, him-

self only narrowly avoided instant death, then reaching, breathless and confused, an island, saw the trio, all safe and well, moving towards the stoutest of the flower-women. He also saw the stout woman take the girl by the arm, shake her violently, say something to her in obvious anger. He also saw the girl turn for an instant her head, look back as though beseeching some one to help her and then follow her green diamond-flashing dragon.

Was it this mute appeal that moved Henry? Was it Fate and Destiny? Was it a longing that justice should be done? Was it the Romantic Spirit? Was it Youth? Was it the Spirit of the Age? Every reader of this book must make an individual decision.

The recorded fact is simply that Henry, hatless, muddy, battered and dishevelled, his books still clutched beneath his arm, followed. Following was no easy matter. It was, as I have already said, the most crowded moment of the day. Beyond the statue and the flower-woman a stout policeman kept back the Shaftesbury Avenue traffic. Men and women rushed across while there was yet time and the woman, the dog and the girl rushed also. As Henry had often before noticed, it was the little things in life that so continually checked his progress. Did he search for a house that he was visiting for the first time, the numbers in that street invariably ceased just before the number that he required. Was anything floating through the air in the guise of a black smut or a flake of tangible dust, certainly it would settle upon Henry's unconscious nose. Was there anything with which a human body might at any moment be entangled, Henry's was the body inevitably caught.

So it was now. At the moment that he was in the middle of the crossing, the stout policeman, most scornfully disregarding him, waved on the expectant traffic. Down it came upon him, cars and taxi-cabs, omnibuses and boys upon bicycles, all shouting and blowing horns and screaming out of whistles. He had the barest moment to skip back into the safe company of the flower-woman. Skip back he did. It seemed to his over-sensitive nature that the policeman sardonically smiled.

When he recovered from his indignant agitation there was of course no sign of the flaming feather. At the next opportunity he crossed and standing by the paper-stall and the Pavilion advertisements gazed all around him. Up the street and down the street. Down the street and up the street. No sign at all. He walked quickly towards the Trocadero restaurant, crossed there to the Lyric Theatre, moved on to the churchyard by the entrance to Wardour Street, and then gazed again.

What happened next was so remarkable and so obviously designed by a kindly paternal Providence that for the rest of his life he could not quite escape from a conviction that fate was busied with him! a happy conviction that cheered him greatly in lonely hours. Out from the Upper Circle entrance to the Apollo Theatre, so close to him that only a narrow unoccupied street separated him, came the desired three, the woman and the dog first, the girl following. They stood for a moment, then the woman once more said something angrily to the girl and they turned into Wardour Street. Now was all the world hushed and still, the graves in the churchyard slept, a woman leaning against a doorway sucked an orange, the sun slipped down

behind the crooked chimneys, saffron and gold stole into the pale shadows of the sky, and the morning and the evening were the First Day.

Henry followed.

Around Wardour Street hang all the shabby and tattered traditions of the poor degraded costume romance, but in its actual physical furniture there are not even trappings. There is nothing but Cinema offices, public-houses, barbers' shops, clothes shops, and shops with windows so dirty that you cannot tell what their trade may be. It is a romantic street in no sense of the word; it is not a kindly street nor a hospitable; angry words are for ever echoing from wall to wall and women scream behind shuttered windows.

Henry had no time to consider whether it were a romantic street or no. The feather waved in front of him and he followed. He had by now forgotten that he was hatless and dirty. A strangely wistful eagerness urged him as though his heart were saying with every beat: 'Don't count too much on this. I know you expect a great deal. Don't be taken in.'

He did expect a great deal; with every step excitement beat higher. Their sudden reappearance when he had thought that he had lost them seemed to him the most wonderful omen. He believed in omens, always throwing salt over his left shoulder when he spilt it (which he continually did), never walking under ladders, and of course never lighting three cigarettes with one match.

Some way up Wardour Street on the left as you go towards Oxford Street there is a public-house with the happy country sign of the Intrepid Fox. No one knows how long the Intrepid Fox has charmed the inhabitants of Wardour Street into its

dark and intricate recesses—Tom Jones may have known it and Pamela passed by it and Humphrey Clinker laughed in its doorway—no one now dare tell you and no history book records its name. Only Henry will never until he dies forget it, and for him it will always be one of the most romantic buildings of the world.

It stood at the corner of Wardour Street and a little thoroughfare called Peter Street. Henry reached the Intrepid Fox just as the Flaming Feather vanished beyond the rows of flower and vegetable stalls that thronged the roadway. Peter Street it seemed was the market of the district ; beneath the lovely blue of the evening the things on the stall are picturesque and touching, even old clothes, battered hats, boots with gaping toes and down-trodden heels, and barrows of all sorts with dirty sheets of music and old paper-covered novels and tin trays and cheap flower-painted vases. In between these booths the feather waved. Henry pursuing stumbled over the wooden stands of the barrows, nearly upset an old watery-eyed woman from her chair—and arrived just in time to see the three pursued vanish through a high faded green door that had the shabby number in dingy red paint, Seven.

Number Seven was, as he at once perceived, strangely situated. At its right was the grimy thick-set exterior of the ' City of London ' public-house, on its left there was a yard roofed in by a wooden balcony like the balcony of a country Inn, old and rather pathetic, with some flower-pots ranged along it and three windows behind it ; the yard and the balcony seemed to belong to another and simpler world than the grim ugliness of the ' City of London '

and her companions. The street was full of business and no one had time to consider Henry. In this neighbourhood the facts that he was without a hat and needed a wash were neither so unusual nor so humorous as to demand comment.

He stood and looked. This was the time for him to go home. His romantic adventure was now logically at an end. Did he ring the bell of Number Seven he had nothing whatever to say if the door were opened.

The neighbourhood was not suited to his romantic soul. The shop opposite to him declaring itself in large white letters to be the 'Paris Fish Dinner' and announcing that it could provide at any moment 'Fish fried in the best dripping' was the sort of shop that destroyed all Henry's illusions. He should, at this point, have gone home. He did not. He crossed the road. The black yard, smelling of dogs and harness, invited him in. He stumbled in the dusk against a bench, and some boxes but no human being seemed to be there. As his eyes grew accustomed to the half light he saw at the back of the yard a wooden staircase that vanished into blackness. Still moving as though ordered by some commanding Providence he walked across to this and started to climb. It turned a corner and his head struck sharply a wooden surface that suddenly, lifting with his pressure a little, revealed itself as a trap-door. Henry pushed upwards and found himself, as Mrs. Radcliffe would say, in *a gloomy passage down which the wind blew with gusty vehemence.*

In truth the wind was not blowing nor was anything stirring. The trap-door fell back with a heavy swaying motion and a creaking sigh as though

some one quite close at hand had suddenly fainted. Henry walked down the passage and found that it led to a dusky thick-paned window that overlooked a square just behind the yard through which he had come. This was a very small and dirty square, grimy houses overlooking it and one thin clothes-line cutting the light evening sky, now light topaz with one star and a cherry-coloured baby moon. To the right of this window was another heavily curtained and serving no purpose as it looked out only upon the passage. Beside this window Henry paused. It was formed by two long glass partitions, and these were not quite fastened. From the room beyond came voices, feminine voices, one raised in violent anger. A pause—from below in the yard some one called. A step was ascending the stair.

From within voices again and then a sound not to be mistaken. Some one was slapping somebody's face and slapping it with satisfaction. A sharp cry —and Henry, pushing back the window, stepped forward, became entangled in curtains of some heavy clinging stuff, flung out his arms to save himself and fell for the second time within an hour, and on this occasion into the heart of a company that was most certainly not expecting him.

He had fallen on his knees, and when he stumbled to his feet his left heel was still entangled with the curtain. He nearly fell again, but saved himself with a kind of staggering, suddenly asserted, dignity, a dignity none the easier because he heard the curtain tear behind him as he pulled himself to his feet.

When he was standing once more and able to look about him, the scene that he slowly collected for himself was a simple one—a very ugly room

dressed entirely it seemed at first sight in bright salmon pink, the walls covered with photographs of ladies and gentlemen for the most part in evening dress. There were two large pink pots with palms, an upright piano swathed in pink silk, a bamboo bookcase, a sofa with pink cushions, a table on which tea was laid, the Pomeranian and—three human beings.

The three human beings were in various attitudes of transfigured astonishment exactly as though they had been lent for this special occasion by Madame Tussaud. There was the lady with the green dress, the girl with the flaming feather, and the third figure was a woman, immensely stout and hung with bracelets, pendants, chains and lockets so that when her bosom heaved (it was doing that now quite frantically) the noise that she made resembled those Japanese glass toys that you hang in the window for the wind to make tinkling music with them. The only sounds in the room were this deep breathing and this rattling, twitting, tittering agitation.

Even the Pomeranian was transfixed. Henry felt it his duty to speak, and he would have spoken had he not been staring at the girl as though his eyes would never be able to leave her face again. It was plain enough that it was she who had been slapped a moment ago. There was a red mark on her cheek and there were tears in her eyes.

To Henry she was simply the most beautiful creature ever made in heaven and sent down to this sinful earth by a loving and kindly God. He had thought of her as a child when he first saw her, he thought of her as a child again now, a child who had, only last night, put up her hair—under

the hat with the flaming feather, that hair of a vivid shining gold which was trying to escape in many rebellious directions. The slapping may have had something to do with that. It was obvious at the first glance that she was not English—Scandinavian perhaps with the yellow hair, the bright blue eyes and the clear pink-and-white skin. Her dress of some mole-coloured corduroy, very simple, her little dark hat, set off her vivid colour exquisitely. She shone in that garish vulgar room with the light and purity of some almost ghostly innocence and simplicity. She was looking at Henry, and he fancied that in spite of the tears that were still in her eyes a smile hovered at the corners of her mouth.

'Well, sir?' said the lady in green. She was not really angry, Henry at once perceived, and afterwards he flattered himself because he had from the very first discovered one of the principal features of that lady's 'case'—namely, that she would never feel either anger or disapproval at the entrance of any member of the masculine gender entering any place whatever, in any manner whatever, where she might happen to be. No, it was not anger she showed, nor even curiosity—rather a determination to turn this incident, bizarre and sudden though it might be, to the very best and most profitable advantage.

'You see,' said Henry, 'I was in the passage outside and thought I heard some one call out. I did really.'

'Well, you were mistaken, that's what you were,' said the green lady. 'I must say——! Of all the things!'

'I'm really very sorry,' said Henry. 'I've

never done such a thing before. It must seem very rude.'

'Well, it is rude,' said the green lady. 'If you were to ask me to be as polite as possible and not to hurt anybody's feelings, I couldn't say anything but that. All the same there's no offence taken as I see there was none meant!'

She smiled, the gleam of a distant gold tooth flashed through the air.

'If there's anything I can do to apologise,' said Henry, encouraged by the smile, but hating the smiler more than ever.

'No apologies necessary,' said the green lady. 'Jenssen's my name. Danish. This is Mrs. Armstrong—my daughter Christina——'

As she spoke she smiled at Henry more and more affectionately. Had it not been for the girl he would have fled long before; as it was, with a horrible sickening sensation that in another moment she would stretch out a fat arm and draw him towards her, he held his ground.

'What about a cup of tea?' she said. At that word the room seemed to spring to life. Mrs. Armstrong moved heavily to the table, and sat down with the contented abandonment of a cow safe at last in its manger. The girl also sat down at the opposite end of the table from her mother.

'It's very good of you,' said Henry, hesitating. 'The fact is that I'm not very clean. I had an accident in Piccadilly and lost my hat.'

'That's nothing,' said Mrs. Jenssen, as though falling down in Piccadilly were part of every one's daily programme.

'Come along now and make yourself at home.'

He drew towards her, fascinated against his will by the shrill green of her dress, the red of her cheeks and the strangely intimate and confident stare with which her eyes, slightly green, enveloped him. As he had horribly anticipated, her fat boneless fingers closed upon his arm.

He sat down.

There was a large green teapot painted with crimson roses. The tea was very strong and had been obviously standing for a long time.

Conversation of a very bright kind began between Mrs. Jenssen and Mrs. Armstrong.

'I'm sure you'll understand,' said Mrs. Jenssen, smiling with a rich and expensive glitter, 'that Mrs. Armstrong is my oldest friend. My oldest and my best. What I always say is that others may misunderstand me, but Ruby Armstrong never. If there's one alive who knows me through and through it's Mrs. Armstrong.'

'Yes,' said Henry.

'You mustn't believe all the kind things she says about me. One's partial to a friend of a lifetime, of course, but what I always say is if one isn't partial to a friend, who is one going to be partial to?'

Mrs. Armstrong spoke, and Henry almost jumped from his chair, so unexpectedly bass and masculine was her voice.

'Ada expresses my feelings exactly,' she said.

'I'm sure that some,' went on Mrs. Jenssen, 'would say that it's strange, if not familiar, asking a man to take tea with one when one doesn't even know his name, and his entrance into one's family was so peculiar; but what I always say is that life's short and there's no time to waste.'

'My name's Henry Trenchard,' said Henry, blushing.

'I had a friend once' (Mrs. Jenssen always used the word 'friend' with a weight and seriousness that gave it a very especial importance), 'a Mr. William Trenchard. He came from Beckenham. You remember him, Ruby?'

'I do,' said Mrs. Armstrong. 'And how good you were to him too! No one will ever know but myself how truly good you were to that man, Ada. Your kind heart led you astray there, as it has done often enough before.'

Mrs. Jenssen nodded her head reminiscently. 'He wasn't all he should have been,' she said. 'But there, one can't go on regretting all the actions of the past, or where would one be?'

She regarded Henry appreciatively. 'He's a nice boy,' she said to Mrs. Armstrong. 'I like his face. I'm a terrible woman for first impressions, and deceived though I've been, I still believe in them.'

'He's got kind eyes,' said Mrs. Armstrong, blowing on her tea to cool it.

'Yes, they're what I'd call thinking eyes. I should say he's clever.'

'Yes, he looks clever,' said Mrs. Armstrong.

'And I like his smile,' said Mrs. Jenssen.

'Good-natured I should say,' replied Mrs. Armstrong.

This direct and personal comment floating quite naturally over his self-conscious head embarrassed Henry terribly. He had never been discussed before in his own presence as though he didn't really exist. He didn't like it; it made him extremely uneasy. He longed to interrupt and direct the conversation into a safer channel, but

every topic of interest that occurred to him seemed unsuitable. The weather, the theatres, politics, Bolshevism, high prices, food, house decoration, literature and the Arts—all these occurred to him but were dismissed at once as unlikely to succeed. Moreover, he was passionately occupied with his endeavour to catch glimpses of the girl at the end of the table. He did not wish to look at her deliberately lest that should embarrass her. He would not for the world bring her into any kind of trouble. The two women whom he hated with increasing vehemence were watching with every moment that passed like vultures waiting for their prey. (This picture and image occurred quite naturally to Henry.) The glimpses that he did catch of the soft cheek, the untidy curls, the bend of the head and the curve of the neck, fired his heart to a heroism, a purity of purpose, a Quixotism that was like wine in his head, so that he could scarcely hear or see. He would have liked to have the power at that very instant to jump up, catch her in his arms and vanish through the window. As it was he gulped down his tea and crumbled a little pink cake.

As the meal proceeded the air of the little room became hot and stuffy. The two ladies soon fell into a very absorbing conversation about a gentleman named Herbert whose salient features were that he had a double chin and was careless about keeping engagements. The conversation passed on then to other gentlemen, all of whom seemed in one way or another to have their faults and drawbacks, and to all of whom Mrs. Jenssen had been, according to Mrs. Armstrong, quite marvellously good and kind.

The fool that Henry felt!

Here was an opportunity that any other man would have seized. He could but stare and gulp and stare again. The girl sat, her plate and cup pushed aside, her hands folded, looking before her as though into some mirror or crystal revealing to her the strangest vision—and as she looked unhappiness crept into her eyes, an unhappiness so genuine that she was quite unconscious of it.

Henry leant across the table to her.

'I say, don't . . . don't!' he whispered huskily.

She turned to him, smiling.

'Don't what?' she asked. There was the merest suggestion of a foreign accent behind her words.

'Don't be miserable. I'll do anything—anything. I followed you here from Piccadilly. I heard her slapping you.'

'Oh I want to get away!' she whispered breathlessly. 'Do you think I can?'

'You can if I help you,' Henry answered. 'How can I see you?'

'She keeps me here . . .'

Their whispers had been low, but the eager conversation at the other end of the table suddenly ceased.

'I'm afraid I must be going now,' said Henry, rising and facing Mrs. Jenssen. 'It was very good of you to give me tea.'

'Come again,' said Mrs. Jenssen, regarding him once more with that curiously fixed stare, a stare like a glass of water in which floated a wink, a threat, a cajoling, and an insult.

'We'll be glad to see you. Just take us as you

find us. Come in the right way next time. There's a bell at the bottom of the stairs.'

Mrs. Armstrong laughed her deep bass laugh.

He shook hands with the two women, shuddering once more at Mrs. Jenssen's boneless fingers. He turned to the girl. 'Good-bye,' he said. 'I'll come again.'

'Yes,' she answered, not looking at him but at her mother at the other side of the table. The stairs were dark and smelt of fish and patchouli. He stumbled down them and let himself out into Peter Street. The evening was blue with a lovely stir in it as in running water. The booths were crowded, voices filled the air. He escaped into Shaftesbury Avenue as Hänsel and Gretel escaped from the witch's cottage. He was in love for the first time in his young, self-centred life. . . .

CHAPTER II

HENRY HIMSELF

In the fifth chapter of the second part of Henry Galleon's *Three Magicians* there is this passage (*The Three Magicians* appeared in 1892) :

When he looked at the Drydens, father, daughter, and son, he would wonder, as he had often in earlier days wondered, why writers on English character so resolutely persisted in omitting the Dryden type from their definitions? These analyses were perhaps too sarcastic, too cynical to include anything as artless, as simple as the Dryden character without giving the whole case away . . . and yet it was, he fancied, in that very character that the whole strength and splendour of the English spirit persisted. Watching Cynthia and Tony Dryden, he was reminded of a picture in a fairy-tale book read and loved by him in his youth, now forgotten to the very name of its author, lingering only with a few faded colours of the original illustrations. He fancied that it had been a book of Danish fairy romances. . . . This picture of which he thought was a landscape—Dawn was breaking over a great champaign of country, country that had hills and woods and forests, streams and cottages all laid out in that detailed fancy that, as a child, he had loved so deeply. The sun was rising over the hill ; heavy dark clouds were rolling back on to the horizon, and everywhere the life of the day, fresh in the sparkling daylight, was beginning. The creatures of the night were vanishing ; dragons with scaly tails were creeping back reluctantly into their caves, giants were brandishing their iron clubs defiantly for the last time before the rising sun ; the Hydras and Gryphons and Five-

Headed Tortoises were slinking into the dusky forests, deep into the waters of the green lakes the slimy Three-Pronged Alligators writhed deep down into the filth that was their proper home.

The flowers were thick on the hills, and in the valleys the birds sang, butterflies and dragon-flies flashed against the blue, the smoke curled up from the cottage chimneys, and over all the world was hung a haze of beauty, of new life and the wonder of the coming day.

In the foreground of this picture were two figures, a girl and a boy, and the painter, clumsy and amateurish though his art may have been, had with the sincerity and fervour of his own belief put into their eyes all their amazement and wonder at the beauty of this new world.

They saw it all; the dragons and the gryphons, the heavy clouds rolling back above the hill, were not hidden from them; that they would return they knew. The acceptance of the whole of life was in their eyes. Their joy was in all of it; their youth made them take it all full-handed. . . .

I have thought of them sometimes—I think of the Drydens now—as the Young Enchanted. And it seems to me that England is especially the country of such men and women as these. All the other peoples of the world carry in their souls age and sophistication. They are too old for that sense of enchantment, but in England that wonder that is so far from common sense and yet is the highest kind of common sense in the world has always flourished. It is not imagination; the English have less imagination than any other race; it is not joy of life nor animal spirits, but the child's trust in life before it has grown old enough for life to deceive it. I think Adam and Eve before the Fall were English.

That sense of Enchantment remains with the English long after it dies with the men and women of other nations, perhaps because the English have not the imagination to perceive how subtle, how dangerous, how cynical life can be. Their art comes straight from their Enchantment. The novels of Fielding and Scott and Thackeray and Dickens and Meredith, the poetry of Wordsworth and Keats and Shelley, the pictures of Hogarth and Constable and Turner. The music of Purcell, the characters of Nelson and Wellington and Gordon. . . .

And think what that sense of Enchantment might do for them if only their background would change. For generations that has not moved. One day when the earthquake comes and the upheaval and all the old landmarks are gone and there is a new world of social disorder and tumbling indecency for their startled gaze to rest upon, then you will see what these children of Enchantment will do!

So much for Galleon, who is already now so shortly after his death looked upon as an old sentimental fogy. Sentimental? Why, certainly. What in the world could be more absurd than his picture of the English gazing wide-eyed at the wonder of life? They of all peoples!

And yet he was no fool. He was a Cosmopolitan. He had lived as much in Rome, in Paris, in Vienna, as in London. And why should I apologise for one of the greatest artists England possesses? Other times other names . . . and you can't catch either Henry Trenchard or Millicent—no, nor Peter either—and I venture to say that you cannot catch that strange, restless, broken, romantic, aspiring, adventurous, disappointing, encouraging, enthralling, Life-is-just-beginning-at-last Period in which they had these adventures, simply with the salt of sheer Realism—not salt enough for *that* Bird's tail.

I should like to find that little picture of Henry Galleon's fairy book and place it as a frontispiece to this story. But Heaven alone knows where that old book has gone to! it was perhaps Galleon's own invention; he was a queer old man and went his own way and had his own fancies, possessions that many writers to-day are chary of keeping because they have been told on so many occasions by so many wise professors that they've got to stick

to the Truth. Truth? Who knows what Truth may be? Platitudinous Pilate failed over that question many years ago, and to-day we are certainly as far as ever from an answer. There are a million Truths about Henry and Millicent and the times they lived in. Galleon's is at least one of them, and it's the one I've chosen because it happens to be the way I see them. But of course there are others.

'The whole Truth and nothing but the truth.' What absurdity for any story-teller in the world to think that he can get that—and what arrogance! This book is the truth about these children as near as I can get to it, and the truth about that strange year 1920 in that strange town, London, as faithfully as I can recollect, but it isn't everybody's Truth. Far from it—and a good thing too.

Henry's rooms were at the top of 24 Panton Street. To get to them you placed a Yale key in the lock of an old brown door, brushed your way through a dim passage, climbed a shabby staircase past the doors of the Hon. Nigel Bruce, Captain D'Arcy Sinclair, Claude Bottome the singer, and old Sir Henry Baistow, who painted his face and wore stays. This was distinguished company for Henry, who was at the beginning of his independent life in London, and the knowledge that he was in the very centre of the Metropolis, that the Comedy Theatre was nearly opposite his door and Piccadilly only a minute away gratified him so much that he did not object to paying three guineas a week for a small bed-sitting-room *without* breakfast. It was a *very* small room, just under the roof, and Henry who was long and bony spent a good deal of his time in a doubled-up position that was neither

aesthetic nor healthy. Three guineas a week is twelve pounds twelve shillings a month, and one hundred and sixty-three pounds sixteen shillings a year. He had a hundred and fifty pounds a year of his own, left to him by his old grandfather, and by eager and even optimistic calculation he reckoned that from his literary labours he would earn at least another hundred pounds in his London twelve months. Even then, however, he would not have risked these handsome lodgings had he not only a month ago, through the kind services of his priggish brother-in-law, Philip Mark, obtained a secretaryship with Sir Charles Duncombe, Bart., at exactly one hundred and fifty pounds per annum.

With inky fingers and a beating heart he produced this estimate :

Income from Grandfather	£150 0 0
Literary Earnings	100 0 0
Sir Charles D.	150 0 0
Grand Total	£400 0 0

And against this he set :

Rooms	£163 16 0
Food	100 0 0
Clothes	50 0 0
Etceteras	50 0 0
	£363 16 0
Saved in first year in London	£36 4 0

There were certain risks about this estimate. For one thing literature might, conceivably, not contribute her hundred pounds quite so completely as he hoped. On the other hand, she might contribute more. . . .

Again, Henry was on trial with Sir Charles, was going into his service the day after to-morrow for the first time, had never been secretary to any one in his life before, and was not by temperament fitted entirely for work that needed those two most Damnable and Soul-Destroying of attributes, Accuracy and Method. He had seen Sir Charles only once, and the grim austerity of that gentleman's aristocratic features had not been encouraging.

Never mind. It was all enchanting. What was life for if one did not take risks? Every one was taking risks, from Mr. Lloyd George down to (or possibly up to) Georges Carpentier and Mr. Dempsey—Henry did not wish to be behind the rest.

Mr. King, his landlord, had suggested to him that he might possibly be willing to buy a new wall-paper and a handsome rug or carpet. There was no doubt at all that the room needed these things; the wall-paper had once been green, was now in many places yellow, and gave an exact account of the precise spots where the sporting prints of the last tenant (young Nigel Frost Bellingham) had hung. The carpet, red many years ago, resembled nothing so much as a map of Europe with lakes, rivers, hills, and valleys clearly defined in grey and brown outline. Henry explained to Mr. King that he would wish to wait for a month or two to see how his fortunes progressed before he made further purchases, upon which Mr. King, staring just over Henry's shoulder at the green wall-paper, remarked that it was usual for gentlemen to pay a month's rent in advance, upon which Henry, blushing, suggested that an improvement in his fortunes was perfectly certain and that he was private

secretary to Sir Charles Duncombe, Bart., of whom Mr. King had doubtless heard. Mr. King, bowing his head as one who would say that there was no Baronet in the United Kingdom of whom he had not heard, nevertheless regretted that the rule concerning the month's rent was constant, unchanging and could in no circumstances whatever be altered.

This Mr. King was little in stature, but great in demeanour. His head was bald save for a few black hairs very carefully arranged upon it, as specimens are laid out in the Natural History Museum. His face also was bald, in the strictest sense of the word ; that is, not only did no hairs grow upon it, but it seemed impossible that any hairs ever had grown upon it. His eyes were sharp, his mouth deprecating and his chin insignificant. He wore, it seemed, the same suit of black, the same black tie, the same stiff white shirt, from year's end to year's end. He showed no human emotion whether of anger, regret, disappointment, expectation or sorrow.

He told no jolly stories of other tenants nor of life about town such as Henry would have liked him to tell. He had, Henry was sure, a great contempt for Henry. He was not, from any point of view, a lovable human being.

Henry did what he could for his room, he was proud of it, felt very kindly towards it, and wanted to clothe it with beauty. It is difficult, however, to make a room beautiful unless the wall-paper and the carpet contribute something. Henry had a nice writing-table that his Uncle Timothy had given him, a gate-legged table from his sister Katherine, and a fine Regency bookcase stolen by

him from his Westminster home. He had three pictures, a Japanese print, a copy of Mr. Belcher's drawing of Pat O'Keefe 'The Wild Irishman,' and a little water-colour by Lovat Fraser of a king and queen marching into a banquet-hall and attended by their courtiers. This last, splendid in gold and blue, green and red, was the joy of Henry's heart and had been given him by his sister Millicent on his last birthday.

In the book-case there were, on the whole, the books that you would expect—the poems of Swinburne, Dowson, and Baudelaire, some of the 1890 novelists and one or two moderns. But he was also beginning to collect a few rare editions, and he had *Clarissa* and *The Mysteries of Udolpho* and *The Monk* in their original bindings, and an early *Pilgrim's Progress*, a rather rare Donne and a second *Vicar of Wakefield*. These were his greatest treasures. He had only two photographs in his room—that of his sisters and that of his greatest and perhaps his only friend. These stood one on either side of the very plain alarm-clock that took up the middle of the mantelpiece.

Henry, as he sat on his bed, looking before him out of the little window across to the corner gables of the Comedy Theatre, appeared very much the same crude and callow youth that he had seemed on going up to Oxford just before the War.

He had not yet caught up to his size, which had leapt ahead of his years when he was about sixteen. He was still long, lean and untidy, his black hair refusing any kind of control, his complexion poor with a suspicion of incipient pimple, his ears too red, his hands never quite clean. The same and yet not at all the same.

The hint of beauty that there had been, when he was nineteen, in the eyes and mouth and carriage of neck and shoulders was now, when he was twenty-six, more clearly emphasised. At first sight Henry seemed an untidy and rather uncleanly youth ; look again and you would see quite clearly that he would be, one day, a distinguished man. His untidiness, the way that his trousers bagged at the knee, that he carried, like some knight with his lady's favour, the inevitable patch of white on his sleeve, that his boots were not rightly laced and his socks not sufficiently 'suspended'—these things only indicated that he was in the last division of the intermediate class, between youth and manhood.

The War had very nearly made him a man, and had not the authorities discovered, after his first wound in 1915, that he was quite hopeless in command of other men but not at all a fool at intelligence he would have been a man complete by this time. The War smartened him a little but not very much, and the moment he was free he slipped back into his old ways and his old customs with a sigh of relief.

But there again not entirely. Like his cousin John, who was killed in Galicia in 1915 stretcher-bearing for the Russians, he was awkward in body but clean in soul. The War had only emphasised something in him that was there before it, and the year and a half that he spent with his family in the Westminster house after the Armistice was the most terrible time of his life. No one knew what to do with him. His mother had had a stroke in the spring of 1917 and now lay like a corpse at the top of the old house, watching, listening, suffering an agony of rebellion in her proud and obstinate soul.

With her influence gone, his grandfather and his great-aunt Sarah dead, his two aunts Betty and Anne living in the country down at Walton-on-Thames, his father more and more living his own life in his study, his sister Katherine married and involved now entirely in her own affairs, Henry felt the big house a Mausoleum of all his hopes and ambitions. Return to Oxford he would not. Strike out and live on his one hundred and fifty pounds he would at the first possible moment, but one thing after another prevented him. He remained in that grim and chilly house mainly because of his sister Millicent, whom he loved with all his heart and soul, and for whom he would do anything in the world.

She also had a little money of her own, but the striking out was a little difficult for her. Her father and mother, all the relations said, needed her, and it wanted all the year and a half to prove to the relations that this was not so. Her father scarcely saw her except at breakfast and, although he regarded her with a kindly patronage, he preferred greatly his books, his club, and his daily newspaper. Her mother did not need her at all, having been angered before the War at the action that Millie took in the great family quarrel of Katherine *v.* Mrs. Trenchard, and being now completely under the control of a hard and tyrannical woman, Nurse Bennett, whose word now was law in the house, whose slightest look was a command.

Millicent and Henry determined that when they escaped it should be together. Millicent had her own plans, and after some months of mysterious advertising in the newspapers, of interviews and secret correspondences, she secured the post of

secretary companion to a certain Miss Victoria Platt who lived at 85 Cromwell Road, Kensington. At the very same time Philip found for Henry the secretaryship of which I have already spoken. They escaped then together—Millicent to rooms at the top of Baker Street that she shared with a girl friend, Mary Cass, and Henry to the hospitality of Mr. King. Their engagements also were to begin together, Millicent going to Miss Platt for the first time on the morning after the day of which I am writing, Henry to go to his Baronet on the day after that.

They were beginning the world together. There was surely a fine omen in that. Apart they would do great things—but, together, was there anything they could not do?

At 7.15 that evening, bathed in the blue dusk that filtered in through the little attic window, Henry was sitting on his bed, staring, wide-eyed, in front of him.

At 8.15 on that same evening, hidden now by the purple shades of night, he was still sitting there, his mouth open, staring in front of him. It is desperately platitudinous—it is also desperately true—that there is no falling in love like the first falling in love. And Henry was fortunate in this—that he had fallen in love for the first time at a comparatively ripe age. To some it is the governess or the music-master, to some even the nurse or the gardener's boy. But Henry had in the absolute truth of the absolute word never been in love before to-night.

He had loved—yes. First his mother, then his sister Katherine, then his sister Millicent, then his friend Westcott. These affections had been loyal

and true and profound, but they had been of the heart and the brain, and for true love the lust of the flesh must be added to the lust of the mind and the heart.

He had tumbled in then, to-day, head foremost, right in, with all his hero-worship, his adoration, his ignorance, his purity, his trust and confidence, fresh, clean, unsullied, to offer as acceptable gifts. He could not, sitting on his bed, think it out clearly at all. He could only see everything in a rosy mist, and in the heart of the mist a flaming feather and Piccadilly boiling and bubbling, and Mrs. Jenssen with her bright green dress, and the stable-yard, and the teapot with the flowers, and there—somewhere behind these things—that girl with her fair hair, her unhappy gaze beyond him, far far beyond him, into worlds that were not as yet his but that one day might be. And with all this his heart pounding in a strange suffocating manner, his eyes burning, his throat choking, his brain refusing to bring before him two connected thoughts.

At last, when St. James's Church struck half-past eight, a thought *did* penetrate.

He had promised to go to the Hunters' evening party. Never less did he want to go to a party than to-night. He would wish to continue to sit on his bed and study the rosy mist. 'I will sit here,' he said, 'and perhaps soon the face will come to me just as it was. I can't see it now, but if I wait. . . .' Then he had cramp in his leg, and the sudden jerk shot him from the bed and forced him to stand in the middle of the floor in an extraordinary attitude with one leg stiff and the other bent as though he were Nijinsky practising for the 'Spectre de la Rose.'

The shock of his agony drove him to consider two very good reasons for going to the Hunters' party. One was material—namely, that he had had nothing to eat since Mrs. Jenssen's pink cake, that he was very hungry in spite of his love, and that there would be free sandwiches at the Hunters'. The other reason was a better one—namely, that it was possible that his friend Westcott would be there, and to Westcott, above all human beings, save only Millicent, he wished to confide the history of his adventure.

Concerning his friendship with Westcott a word must be said. About a year ago at the house of a friend of Philip's he had been introduced to a thick-set saturnine man who had been sitting by himself in a corner and appearing entirely bored with the evening's proceedings. His host had thrown Henry at this unattractive guest's head as though he would say : ' I dare not offer up any of my more important guests to this Cerberus of a fellow, but here's a young ass who doesn't matter and I don't care whether his feelings are hurt or no.' Henry himself was at that time cultivating a supercilious air in public, partly from shyness and partly because he did not wish to reveal how deeply pleased he was at being invited to parties. He liked at once Westcott's broad shoulders, close-cropped hair, and nonchalant attitude. The first ten minutes of their conversation was not a success, and then Henry discovered that Westcott had, in the days of his youth, actually known, spoken to, had tea with the God of his, Henry's, idolatry, Henry Galleon. Westcott was perhaps touched by young Henry's ingenuous delight, his eager questions, his complete forgetfulness of himself

and his surroundings at this piece of information. He in his turn launched out and talked of the London of fifteen years ago and of the heroes of that time, a time that the War had made historic, curious, picturesque, a time that was already older than crinolines, almost as romantic as the Regency. Their host left them together for the remainder of the evening, feeling that he had most skilfully killed two dull birds with one stone. They departed together, walked from Hyde Park Corner together, and by the time that they parted were already friends. That friendship had held firm throughout the succeeding year. As a friendship it was good for both of them. Westcott was very lonely and too proud to go out and draw men in. Henry needed just such an influence as Westcott's, the influence of a man who had known life at its hardest and bitterest, who had come through betrayal, disappointed ambition, poverty and loneliness without losing his courage and belief in life, a man whose heart was still warm towards his fellowmen although he kept it guarded now lest he should too easily be again betrayed.

There was no need to keep it guarded from Henry, whose transparent honesty could not be mistaken. Henry restored something of Westcott's lost confidence in himself. Henry believed profoundly in what he insisted on calling Westcott's 'genius,' and that even the simplest soul on earth should believe in us gives some support to our doubting hopes and wavering ambitions. Henry admitted quite frankly to Westcott that he had not heard of him before he met him. Peter's novels—*Reuben Hallard*, *The Stone House*, *Mortimer Stant* and two others—had been before Henry's

time, and the little stir that *Reuben* had made had not penetrated the thick indifference of his school-days. Westcott was not at all sensitive to this ignorance. Before the War he had broken entirely with the literary life, and his five years' war service abroad had not encouraged him to renew that intimacy. He had had hard starving days since the Armistice, and had been driven back almost against his will to some reviewing and writing of articles.

All men had not forgotten him he discovered with a strange dim pleasure that beat like a regret deep into his soul—the younger men especially, because he had been a commercial failure, were inclined to believe that he had been an artistic success. Mysterious allusions were made in strange new variegated publications to *Reuben Hallard* and *Mortimer Stant.*

He began to review regularly for *The Athenæum* and *The New Statesman*, and he did some dramatic criticism for *The Nation.* He soon found to his own surprise that he was making income enough to live without anxiety in two small rooms in the Marylebone High Street, where he was cared for by a kindly widow, Mrs. Sunning, who found that he resembled her son who was killed in the War and therefore adored him. Even, against his will, against all his hopes, there were faint stirrings of a novel in his brain. He did not wish to revive *that* ambition again, but the thing would come and settle there and stir a little and grow day by day, night by night, in spite of his reluctance and even hostility.

Perhaps in this Henry had some responsibility. Henry was so sure that Peter had only to begin

again and the world would be at his feet. One night, the two of them sitting over a small grumbling fire in the Coventry Street attic, Peter spoke a little in detail of his book.

After that Henry never left him alone. The book was born now in Henry's brain as well as in Peter's ; it knew its own power and that its time would come.

Peter had by no means confided all his life's history to Henry. The boy only knew that there had been a great tragedy, that Westcott was married but did not know where his wife was or even whether she were still alive. Of all this he spoke to no man.

Gabriel Hunter was a painter of the new and extravagant kind ; his wife wore bobbed hair, wrote poetry, and cultivated a little Salon in Barton Street, Westminster, where they lived.

The Hunters were poor and their house was very small, and quite a small number of people caused it to overflow, but to Henry during the last year the Hunter gatherings had stood to him for everything in life that was worth while. It was one of his real griefs that Millicent wouldn't go to that house, declaring that she hated the new poets and the new painters and the new novelists, that she liked Tennyson and Trollope and John Everett Millais, and that as soon as she had a house of her own she was going to collect wax flowers and fruit and horse-hair sofas. She said many of these things to irritate Henry, and irritate him she did, being able to separate him from his very volcanic temper within the space of two minutes if she tried hard enough.

On every other occasion going to the Hunters' had been synonymous to Henry with going to Paradise. To-night for the first time it seemed to

be simply going to Westminster. At last, however, hunger drove him, and at a quarter-past nine he found himself in the Hunters' little hall, all painted green with red stripes, and a curtain covered with purple bananas and bright crimson oranges hanging in front of the kitchen stairs.

The noise above was deafening, and had that peculiarly shrill sound which the New literature seems to carry with it in its train, just as a new baby enjoys its new rattle. When Henry peered into the little drawing-room he could see very little because of the smoke. The scene outlined from the doorway must have seemed to an unprepared stranger to resemble nothing so much as a little study in the Inferno painted by one of the younger artists. Behind and through the smoke there were visions of a wall of bright orange and curtains of a brilliant purple. On the mantelpiece staring through the room and grinning malevolently was the cast of a negro's head.

A large globe hanging from the ceiling concealed the electric light behind patterns of every conceivable colour. The guests were sitting on the floor, on a crimson sofa, and standing against the wall. Henry soon discovered that to-night's was a very representative gathering.

Standing just inside the door, he felt for the first time in the Hunters' house perfectly detached from the whole affair. Always before he had loved the sensation of plunging in, of that sudden immersion in light and colour and noise, of swimming with all the others towards some ideally fantastic island of culture that would be entirely, triumphantly their own. But to-night the intense personal experience that he had just passed through

kept him apart, led him to criticise and inspect as though he were a visitor from another planet. Was that in itself a criticism of the whole world of Art and Literature proving to him that that must always crumble before real life, or was it simply a criticism of some of the crudity and newness of this especial gathering? Peering through the smoke and relieved that no one appeared to take the slightest notice of him, he saw that this was indeed a representative gathering because all the Three Graces were here together. Never before had he seen them all at one time in the same place. Whether it were because of the exhaustion that five years' war had entailed upon the men of the country or simply that the complete emancipation of women during the last decade had brought many new positions within women's power, it was certain that just at this period, that is at the beginning of 1920, much of the contemporary judgement on art and letters was delivered by women—and in letters by three women especially, Miss Talbot, Miss Jane Ross, and Miss Martha Proctor. These three ladies had certain attributes in common—a healthy and invigorating contempt for the abilities of the opposite sex, a sure and certain confidence in their own powers, and a love of novelty and originality. Miss Talbot, seated now upon the red sofa, was the reviewer of the fiction in *The Planet*. She was the most feminine of the three, slight in stature, fair-haired and blue-eyed, languid and even timid in appearance. Her timidity was a disguise; week after week did she destroy the novels before her, adroitly, dispassionately, and with a fine disregard for the humaner feelings. In her there burnt, however, a truer and finer love of

literature than either Jane Ross or Martha Proctor would ever know. She had ever before her young vision her picture of the perfect novel, and week after week she showed her scorn in italicised staccato prose for the poor specimens that so brazenly ventured to interfere between her vision and herself.

Had she her way no novelist alive should remain ungaoled, so vile a sin had he committed in thus with his soiled and clumsy fingers desecrating the power, beauty, and wisdom of an impossible ideal.

Meanwhile she made a very good income out of her unending disappointment.

Far other Jane Ross.

Jane Ross was plain, pasty-faced, hook-nosed, squat-figured, beetle-browed, and she was the cleverest journalist at that time alive in England. Originally, ten years ago, when she came from the Midlands with a penny in her pocket and a determination to make her way, it may have been that she cared for literature with a passion as pure and undeviating as Grace Talbot's own. But great success, a surprised discovery of men's weakness and sloth, a talent for epigrams unequalled by any of her contemporaries, had led her to sacrifice all her permanent standards for temporary brilliance. She was also something of a cat, being possessed suddenly to her own discontent by little personal animosities and grievances that she might have controlled quite easily had not her tongue so brilliantly led her away. She had, deep down in her soul, noble intentions, but the daily pettinesses of life were too strong for her ; she won all her battles so easily that she did not perceive that she was meanwhile losing the only battle that really mattered.

As her journalism grew more and more brilliant her real influence grew less and less. When her brain was inactive her heart, suddenly released, could be wonderfully kind. A little more stupidity and she would have been a real power.

For both Grace Talbot and Jane Ross the new thing was the only thing that mattered. When you listened to them or read them you would suppose that printing had been discovered for the first time somewhere about 1890 and in Manchester. Martha Proctor, less brilliant than the other two, had a wider culture than either of them. The first glance at her told you that she was a journalist; tall, straight-backed, her black hair brushed back from a high forehead, dressed in tweeds, stiff white collars and cuffs, wearing pince-nez, she seemed to have nothing to do with the prevalent fashion. And she had not. Older than the other two, she had come in with the Yellow Book and promised to go out with Universal Suffrage. She had fought her battles; in politics her finest time had been in the years just before the War when she had bitten a policeman's leg in Whitehall and broken a shop-window in Bond Street with her little hammer. In literature her great period had been during the Romantic Tushery of 1895 to 1905. How she had torn and scarified the Kailyard novelists, how the Cloak and Sword Romances had bled beneath her whip. Now none of these remained, and the modern Realism had gone far beyond her most confident anticipations. She knew in her heart that her day was over; there was even, deep down within her, a faint alarm at the times that were coming upon the world. She knew that she seemed old-fashioned to Jane Ross, and her

only comfort was that in ten years' time Jane Ross would undoubtedly in her turn seem old-fashioned to somebody else. Because her horizon was wider than that of her two companions she was able to judge in finer proportion than they. Fashions passed, men died, kingdoms fell. What remained? Not, as she had once fondly imagined, Martha Proctor.

Two children and a cottage in the country might after all be worth more than literary criticism. She was beginning to wonder about many things for the first time in her life. . . .

I have outlined these ladies in some detail, because for the past year and a half Henry had worshipped at their shrines. How he had revelled in Grace Talbot's cynical judgements, in Jane Ross's epigrams, in Martha Proctor's measured comparisons! To-night for the first time a new vision was upon him. He could only see them, as he stared at them through the smoke, with physical eyes—Grace Talbot's languid indifference, white hands and faint blue eyes; Jane Ross's sallow complexion and crinkled black hair; Martha Proctor's pince-nez and large brown boots.

Then, as his short-sighted eyes penetrated yet more clearly he saw—— Could it be? Indeed it was. His heart beat thickly. There, seated uncomfortably upon an orange chair from Heal's, was no less a person than the great K. Wiggs himself. Henry had seen him on two other occasions, had once indeed spoken to him.

That earlier glorious moment was strong with him now, the thrill of it, the almost passionate excitement of touching that small podgy hand, the very hand that had written *Mr. Whippet* and *Old Cain and Abel* and *The Slumber Family*.

What then to-night had happened to Henry? Why was it that with every longing to recover that earlier thrill he could not? Why was it that again, as just now with the Three Graces, he could see only Mr. Wiggs's physical presence and nothing at all of his splendid and aspiring soul? Mr. Wiggs certainly did not look his best on a purple chair with a stiff back.

And then surely he had fattened and coarsened, even since Henry's last vision of him? His squat figure perched on the chair, his little fat legs crossed, his bulging stomach, his two chins, his ragged moustache, his eyes coloured a faint purple, his thin wispy hair—these things did not speak for beauty. Nor did the voice that penetrated through the clamour to Henry's corner, with its shrill piping clamour, give full reassurance.

It was not, no alas, it was not the voice of a just soul; there was, moreover, a snuffle—a snuffle behind the pipe—that spoke of adenoids—it is very hard to reconcile adenoids with greatness.

And yet Wiggs *was* a great man! You knew that if only by the virulence with which certain sections of the press attacked him whenever he made a public appearance.

He *was* a great man. He *is* a great man. Henry repeated the words over to himself with a desperate determination to recover the earlier rapture. He had written great books; he was even then writing them. He was, as Henry knew, a kindly man, a generous man, a man with noble and generous ambitions, a man honest in his resolves and courageous in his utterances. Why then did he look like that, and why was Henry so stupidly conscious of his body and of his body

only? Could it be that the adventure of the afternoon had filled his young soul with so high and splendid an ideal of beauty that everything else in the world was sordid and ugly? He moved restlessly. He did not want to think life sordid and ugly. But *was* this life? Or at any rate was it not simply a very, very small part of life? Was he moving at last from a small ante-room into a large and spacious chamber? (I have said before that picturesque images occurred to him with the utmost frequency.)

He caught fragments of conversation. A lady quite close to him was saying—'But there's no Form in the thing—no Form at all. He hadn't thought the thing out—it's all just anyhow. . . .'

Somewhere else he heard a man's deep bass voice—'Oh, he's no good. He'll always be an amateur. Of course it's obvious you miss truth the moment you go outside the narrator's brain. Now Truth. . . .'

And Wiggs's shrill pipe—'Ow, no. *That* isn't History. That's fable. What do *facts* matter?'

There was a little stir by the door. Henry turned and found Peter Westcott standing at his side.

He was instantly delighted to perceive that the change that had crept over him since the afternoon did not include Peter. His feeling for Peter was the same that it had ever been, intensified if possible. He *loved* Peter as he stood there, strong, apart, independent, resolute. *That* was the kind of independence that Henry himself must achieve so that he would not be swayed by every little emotional and critical wind that blew.

'Hallo, Peter,' he said, 'I was looking for you.'

'You haven't been looking very hard,' said Peter. 'I've been here a long time.'

'There's so much smoke,' said Henry.

'Yes, there is. And I've had enough of it. And I'm going.'

'I'm going too,' said Henry. 'Mrs. Hunter has looked at me twice and I don't believe that she's the least idea who I am.'

'You're going?' said Westcott, astonished. 'Why, you *love* these parties. I expected you to be here all night.'

'I don't love it to-night,' said Henry solemnly. 'It all seems silly. Let's go.'

They went down into the Hall, found their coats, and passed into the serenity and peace of Barton Street.

'Do you mind walking a bit?' asked Henry.

'As a matter of fact,' said Westcott, 'I'm going to walk all the way home. I'll take you up through Coventry Street if you like and drop you at your Palace.'

'I only went there to-night to see you,' said Henry. 'I've got something very important to tell you.'

They walked in silence into Whitehall. Henry found it difficult to begin, and Westcott never spoke unless he had something that he really wanted to say—a reason sufficient for the reputation of sulkiness that many people gave him. The beauty of the night too kept them silent. After that hot, over-coloured room London was like some vast, gently moving lake upon whose bosom floated towers and lamps and swinging barges—myriads of stars were faint behind a spring mist that veiled, revealed and veiled again an orange moon.

Only the towers of the Houses of Parliament were sharp and distinct, and they too seemed to move with the gentle rhythm as though they were the bulwarks of some giant ship sailing towards some certain destination.

So quiet was the world that all life seemed to be hypnotised into wondering expectation.

'Well now, Henry, what is it?' asked Peter at last.

'It's the most extraordinary thing,' said Henry. 'I suppose you'll laugh at me. Anybody would. But I just couldn't help myself. It didn't seem like myself doing it.'

'Doing what?'

'Why, before I knew I was following them. And I hadn't any reason to follow them. That's the funny thing. Only I'd just fallen down.'

Peter turned upon him. 'For God's sake, Henry, get it straight—whom were you following and where? And where did you fall down?'

'In Piccadilly Circus. I was just staring around and some one pushed me and I fell on my knees, and when I'd picked myself up again they'd got half-way across——'

'They? Who?'

'Why, the woman and her daughter. At least of course I didn't know she was her daughter then. It was only afterwards——'

Peter was irritable. 'Look here, if you don't straighten everything out and tell me it all quite simply from the beginning with names and dates and everything, I leave you instantly and never see you again.'

Henry tried again and, staring in front of him so that he stumbled and walked like a man in a

dream, he recovered it all, seeing freshly as though he were acting in it once more and giving it to Westcott with such vivid drama that they had arrived outside the door in Panton Street as though they had been carried there on a magic carpet. 'And after that,' finished Henry, 'I just came home and I've been thinking about her ever since.'

The street was very quiet. Within the theatre rows and rows of human beings were at that moment sitting, their mouths open and their knees pressed together while 'The Ruined Lady' went through incredible antics for their benefit. Outside the theatre a few cars were standing, a man or two lounged against the wall, and the stars and the orange moon, released now from their entangling mist, shone like lights through a tattered awning down upon the glassy surface of the street. Peter put his hand upon Henry's shoulder; the boy was trembling.

'Take my advice,' he said, 'and drop it.'

'What do you mean?' asked Henry fiercely.

'Of course you won't follow my advice, but I'm older than you are. You asked me to advise you and I'm going to. Don't you see what those two women are? If you don't you're even more of an ass than I know you to be.'

'What do you mean?' said Henry again.

'Well, just ask yourself, what kind of a woman is it who when a strange man bursts in through her window smiles and asks him to tea?'

'If she's like that,' said Henry angrily, 'then all the more I've got to get the girl out of it.'

Peter shrugged his shoulders. 'I bet the girl knows what she's about,' he said.

Henry laughed scornfully, 'That's the worst of you, Peter,' he said. 'You're a cynic. You don't believe in anybody or in anything. You always see things at their worst.'

Peter smiled. 'That's as may be,' he said. 'I believe in you anyway. You know quite well that if you get in a mess I've got to pull you out of it. I'm only warning you. If you like, I'll go with you next time and see the girl.'

Henry looked up at the moon. 'I know I'm an ass about some things,' he said. 'But I'm not an ass about this. I'll save her if I die for it.'

Peter was touched.

'You're bewitched,' he said. 'I was once. I don't want to wake you up. The only trouble with these things is that the enchantment doesn't last, but the things we do under the enchantment do. However, it's better to have been enchanted, whatever comes of it, than never to have been enchanted at all. Will you promise me one thing?'

'What's that?' asked Henry.

'To tell me everything, exactly, truthfully.'

'Yes, if you don't laugh at me.'

'No, I won't—unless you can laugh as well. But you're going to get into a mess over this as sure as you're Henry Trenchard, and if I don't know all about it I shan't be able to help you when the time comes that you need me.'

'I'll tell you everything,' said Henry fervently.

'When do you go to your old Baronet?'

'The day after to-morrow.'

'Well, I'll come in and see you here that afternoon about five and get your news. Is that all right?'

'Yes,' said Henry. 'Isn't it a wonderful night? I think I'll walk about a bit.'

'You're going to look up at her window?'

Henry blushed, a thing that he did very easily. 'You can't see her window from the street,' he said. 'It's quite true I might go round that way.'

Westcott went off laughing. The moon and Henry were left alone together.

CHAPTER III

MILLIE

Millicent Trenchard was at this time twenty-five years of age.

She had been pretty at eighteen, she was beautiful now, beautiful in the real sense of that terribly abused word, because she aroused interest as well as admiration in the beholder. The questions asked about her would be always different ones, depending for their impulse on the private instincts and desires of the individual.

Her eyes were large, dark, her figure slender, her colouring fair, her hair (she had a mass of it) dark brown with some shadow of dull gold in its threads, her neck and shoulders lovely with a pure healthy whiteness of colour and form that only youth could give her, her chin strong and determined but not exaggerated—all this catalogue is useless. Her beauty did not lie in these things, but in the vitality, the freedom, the humour, the wildness of her spirit. Her eyes, the dimple in her cheek, the high, clear forehead spoke of kindness, generosity, love of her fellow-men, but it was the quality behind those things, the quality of a soul absolutely free and independent but not selfish, open-minded and honest but neither dogmatic nor

impertinent, young and ignorant perhaps but ready for any discovery, fearless and excited but tender and soft-hearted, unsentimental but loyal-hearted, that finally told. Although her means were so slender she dressed admirably, liking bright colours, crimson and purple and orange, but never looking so well as when she was in the simplest black.

She knew everything about dress by natural instinct, could make clothes out of nothing at all (not so difficult in 1920), was able to buy things in the cheapest way at the smartest shops, and really spent less time and thought over all these things than most of the clumsily dressed girls of her acquaintance. She was always neat ; her gloves and her shoes and her stockings were as fine as those of any lady in the land. She was never extravagant in the fashion of the moment nor was she outside it ; when women of sixty wore skirts that belonged more properly to their granddaughters, she who might with pride have been short-skirted was not.

And, just at this time, she was so happy that it made you afraid to watch her. Mary Cass, her friend, was often afraid.

Miss Cass was five years older than Millicent and had seen a great deal of life. She had driven an ambulance in France, and it was afterwards, when nursing in a hospital in Boulogne, that she and Millicent had made friends. She had nursed with the same quiet capacity with which she had driven her ambulance, and now she was studying at the Women's College of Medicine and at the end of her five years' course was going to be one of the most efficient women surgeons in Europe. That was what she set in front of her, and the things

that she set in front of her she obtained. She was a little, insignificant, mild-eyed mouse of a woman with a very determined chin ; she had none of Millicent's gaiety and wild zest for life. Life seemed to her rather a poor thing at best ; she had no great expectations of it, but, on the other hand, bore no one a grudge because she was in the midst of it. So long as she was working at something she was happy ; she was fond of Millicent but not extravagant about her.

Her work was more to her than any human being, and she would have liked Millicent to look on work with a deeper seriousness. This was their one deep difference of opinion, that to Mary Cass work was more than human nature, and that to Millicent people were everything. 'I'd rather live with people I love than write the greatest book in the world,' Millicent said. 'I believe, Mary, that you only make a friend because you hope one day to be able to cut his or her leg off.'

'I'd do it very nicely,' said Mary gravely.

There was a further little trouble between them —that Mary was rather impatient of Henry. She thought him untidy, careless, inaccurate, clumsy and sentimental ; he was undoubtedly all of these things—Millicent, of course, adored Henry and would not hear a word against him from anybody.

'He's only careless because he's a genius,' she said.

'When's he going to begin his genius ?' asked Mary. 'He's twenty-six now.'

'He has begun it. He's written ten chapters of a novel.'

'What's it about ?' asked Mary, with an irritating little sniff that she used on occasions.

'It's about the Eighteenth Century,' said Millie, 'and a house in a wood——'

'People want something more real nowadays,' said Mary.

'He hasn't got to think of what people want,' answered Millie hotly. 'He's got to write what he feels.'

'He's got to make his bread and butter,' said Miss Cass grimly.

Nevertheless it may be suspected that she liked Henry more than she allowed; only her fingers itched to be at him, at his collar and his socks and his boots and his tie. But she believed about this, as she did about everything else, that her day would come.

On the morning that Millie was to go to Miss Platt's for the first time she dressed with the greatest care. She put on a plain black dress and designed to wear with it a little round red hat. She also wore a necklace of small pearls that her father had once given her in a sudden swiftly-vanishing moment of emotion at her surprising beauty. When she came into the sitting-room to breakfast she was compelled to confess to herself that she was feeling extremely nervous, and this amazed her because she so seldom felt nervous about anything. But it would be too awful if this Platt affair went wrong! To begin all over again with those advertisements, those absurd letters, that sudden contact with a world that seemed to be entirely incapacitated and desperately to need help without in the least being willing to pay for it!

That was the real point about Miss Platt, that she was willing to pay. The brief interview had shown Millicent a middle-aged, rather stout woman,

with a face like a strawberry that is afraid that at any moment it may be eaten, over-dressed, nervous, and in some as yet undefined way a little touching. She had taken, it seemed, to Millicent at once, calling her 'my dear' and wanting to pay her anything in reason. 'I'm so tired,' she said, 'and I've seen so many women. They are all so pale. I want some one bright about the house.'

Upon this foundation the bargain had been struck, and Millicent, looking back at it, was compelled to admit that it was all rather slender. She had intended to talk to Mary Cass about it at breakfast, to drive her into reassuring her, but discovered, as so many of us have discovered before now, that our nearest and dearest have, and especially at breakfast, their own lives to lead and their own problems to encounter. Mary's brain was intent upon the dissection of a frog, and although her heart belonged to Millie, medical science had for the moment closed it. Millie therefore left the house in a mood of despondency, very rare indeed with her. She travelled on the top of a succession of omnibuses to Cromwell Road. She had time to spare and it was a lovely spring morning; she liked beyond all things to look down over the side of the omnibus and see all the scattered fragmentary life that went on beneath her. This morning every one was clothed in sun, the buildings shone, and all the people seemed to be dressed in bright colours. London on such a morning could look so easy and comfortable and happy-go-lucky, like a little provincial town, in the way that butchers stout and rubicund stood in front of their shops, and the furniture shops flung sofas and chairs, coal-scuttles and book-case

right out on the pavement with a casual, homely air, and flower-shops seemed to invite you to smell their flowers without paying for it, and women walked shopping with their hand-bags carefully clutched, and boys dashed about on bicycles with a free, unrestrained ecstasy, as though they were doing it simply for their amusement. Other cities had surely acquired by now a more official air, but London would be casual, untidy, and good-natured to the last trump.

Millie soon recovered her very best spirits, and was not in the least offended when a seedy young man stared at her from an opposite seat and wetted his lips with his tongue as though he were tasting something very good indeed.

She had, however, to summon all her spirits to her aid when Cromwell Road encompassed her. Rows and rows of houses all the same, wearing the air, with their white steps, their polished door-handles and the ferns in the window, of a middle-aged business man dressed for church on a Sunday morning. They were smug and without personality. They were thinking about nothing but themselves. No. 85 was as smug as the others.

She rang the bell, and soon a small boy dressed in a blue uniform and brass buttons stared at her and appeared to be incapable of understanding a word that she said.

He stared at her with such astonishment that she was able to push past him into the hall before he could prevent her.

'You can't see Miss 'Toria,' he was heard at last to say in a hoarse voice. 'She don't see any one before she's up.'

'I think she'll see me,' said Millie quietly. 'She's expecting me.'

He continued to stare, and she suggested that he should go and inquire of somebody else. He was away for so long a time that she was able to observe how full the hall was of furniture, and how strangely confused that furniture was. Near the hall-door was a large Jacobean oak chest carved with initials and an old date 1678, and next to this a rickety bamboo table; there were Chippendale chairs and a large brass gong, and beyond these a glass case with stuffed birds. Millie, whose fingers were always itching to arrange things in her own way, could see at once that this might be made into a very jolly house. From the window at the stair-corner came floods of sunlight; she could hear cheerful voices from the kitchen; the house was alive even though it were in a mess. . . .

A tall dark woman in very stiff cap and apron appeared; she 'overlooked' Millie scornfully, and then said in a voice aloof and distant that Miss Platt would see Miss Trenchard upstairs.

Millie followed the woman and, receiving the same impression of light and confusion as she went up, reached the third floor and was led into a room on the right of the stairs.

Here the sun was pouring in, and for a moment it was difficult to see, then through the sunlight certain things declared themselves: item an enormous four-poster bed hung with bright pink curtains, item a whole row of long becking and bowing looking-glasses, item many open drawers sprayed with garments of every kind, item Miss Victoria Platt rising, like Venus from the sea, out of the billowy foam of scattered underclothing,

resplendent in a Japanese kimono and pins falling out of her hair. The tall woman said sharply, 'Miss Trenchard, miss,' and withdrew. Miss Platt, red-faced and smiling, her naked arms like crimson rolling-pins, turned towards her.

'Oh, my dear, isn't it too sweet of you to come so punctually? Never did I need anybody more. I always say I'll be down by nine-thirty sharp. Mrs. Brockett, I say, you can come into the morning-room at nine-thirty precisely. I shall be there. But I never am, you know. Never. Well, my dear, I *am* glad to see you. Come and give me a kiss.'

Millie stepped carefully over the underclothing, found herself warmly encircled, two very wet and emphatic kisses implanted on her cheek, and then a voice hissing in her ear:

'I do want us to be friends, I do indeed. We shall be, I know.'

There was a little pause because Millie did not know quite what to say. Then Miss Platt made some masculine strides towards a rather faded rocking-chair, swept from it a coat and skirt and pointing to it said:

'There, sit down! I'm sure you must be wanting a rest after your journey.'

'Journey!' said Millie laughing, 'I haven't had a journey! I've only come from Baker Street.'

'Why, of course,' said Miss Platt, 'it was another girl altogether who was coming from Wiltshire. I didn't like her, I remember, because she had a slight moustache, which father always told us implied temper.' She stood back and regarded Millie.

'Why, my dear, how pretty you are! Aren't

you the loveliest thing ever? And that little hat! How well you dress!' She sighed, struggling with her corsets. (The kimono was now a dejected heap upon the floor.) 'Dress is so easy for some people. It seems to come quite naturally to them. Perhaps my figure's difficult. I don't know. It's certainly simpler for slim people.'

'Oh, do let me help you,' cried Millie, jumping up. She came over to her and in a moment the deed was done.

'Thank you a thousand times,' said Miss Platt. 'How kind you are. I have a maid, you know, but she's going at the end of the week. I simply couldn't bear her superior manner, and when she went off one Saturday afternoon from my very door in a handsome motor-car that was too much for me. And she wanted to practise on my piano. Servants! You'll have to help there, my dear. Change them as often as you like, but they must be willing and have some kind of friendly feeling for one. I can't bear to have people in the house who look as though they'd poison your soup on the first opportunity. Why can't we all like one another? I'm sure I'm ready enough.'

Millie said: 'I suppose it doesn't do to spoil them too much.'

'You're right, dear, it doesn't. But as soon as I speak severely to them they give notice, and I *am* so tired of registry offices. I just go in and out of them all day. I do hope you're good with servants.'

'I'll do my best,' said Millie, smiling bravely, although her heart was already sinking at the sense of her inexperience and ignorance.

'I'm sure you will,' said Miss Platt, who was

now arrayed in bright blue. 'Method is what this house wants. You look methodical. The very way you put your clothes on shows me that. My sister Ellen has method, but household affairs don't interest her. She lives in a world of her own. Clarice, my youngest sister, has no method at all. She's the most artistic of us. She paints and sings too delightfully. Are you artistic?'

'No, I'm not,' said Millie. 'Not a little bit.'

Miss Platt seemed for a moment disappointed. 'I'm sorry for that. I do *love* the Arts, although I don't do anything myself. But I do encourage them wherever I can.' Then she brightened again. 'It's much better you shouldn't be artistic. You're more likely to have method.'

'I have a brother who writes,' said Millie.

'Now, isn't that wonderful!' Miss Platt was delighted. 'You must bring him along. I do think I'd rather be able to write than anything. What kind of thing does he write?'

'Well, he's rather young and of course the war kept him back, but he's in the middle of a novel and he reviews books for the papers.'

'Why, how splendid!' Miss Platt was ready now to depart. 'How clever he must be to write a novel! All those conversations they put in! I'm sure I don't know where they get it all from. What a gift! Mind you bring him to see me, dear, as soon as ever you can.'

'I will,' said Millie.

'I do love to have literary and artistic people round me. We do have quite delightful musical parties here sometimes. And dances too. Do you dance?'

'I love it,' said Millie.

'That's splendid. Now come along. We'll go downstairs and start the morning's work.'

The drawing-room was just such a place as Millie had expected, a perfect menagerie of odds and ends of furniture, and the walls covered with pictures ranging from the most sentimental of Victorians to the most symbolic and puzzling of Cubists. But what a nice room this could be did it contain less! Wide, high windows welcomed the sun, and a small room off the larger one could have the most charming privacy and cosiness. But the smaller room was at the moment blocked with a huge roll-top desk and a great white statue of a naked woman holding an apple and peering at it as though she were expecting it to turn into something strange like a baby or a wild fowl at the earliest possible moment. This statue curved in such a way that it seemed to hang above the roll-top desk in an inquiring attitude. It was the chilliest-looking statue Millie had ever seen.

'Yes,' said Miss Platt, seeing that Millicent's eyes were directed towards this, 'that is the work of a very rising young sculptor, an American, Ephraim Block. You'll see him soon; he often comes to luncheon here. I do love to encourage the newer art, and Mr. Block is one of the very newest.'

'What is the subject?' asked Millie.

'Eve and the Apple,' said Miss Platt. 'It was originally intended that there should be a Tree and a Serpent as well, but Mr. Block very wisely saw that very few Art Galleries would be large enough for a tree such as he had designed, so they are to come later when he has some open-air commissions. He is a very agreeable young man; you'll like him,

I'm sure. Some of my friends think the statue a little bold, but after all in the service of art we must forget our small pruderies, must we not? Others see a resemblance in Eve to myself, and Mr. Block confessed that he had me a little in mind when he made his design. Poor man, he has a wife and children, and life is a great struggle for him, I'm afraid. These Americans will marry so young. Now this,' she went on, turning to the roll-top desk, 'is where I keep my papers, and one of the very first things I want you to do is to get them into something like order.

'They are in a perfect mess at present and I never can find anything when I want it. I thought you might begin on that at once. I have to go out for an hour or two to see a friend off to America. What she's going to America for I can't imagine. She's such a nice woman with two dear little boys, but she had a sudden passion to see Chicago and nothing could keep her. I shall be back by twelve, and if there's anything you want just ring the bell by the fireplace there and Beppo will attend to you.'

'Beppo?' asked Millie.

'Yes, he's the page-boy. After dear father died I had a butler, but he got on so badly with Mrs. Brockett that I thought it wiser to have a boy. My sister, Clarice, suggested that he should be called Beppo. He was a little astonished at first because he's really called Henry, but he's quite used to it now. Well, good-bye, dear, for the moment. I can't tell you what a relief it is to me to have you here. It simply makes the whole difference.'

Millie was left alone in her glory.

At first she wandered about the room, looking at the pictures, glancing out of the windows at the

bright and flashing colour that flamed on the roofs and turned the chimney-pots into brown and gold and purple, gazed at a huge picture over the marble mantelpiece of three girls, obviously the Miss Platts twenty years ago, modest and giggling under a large green tree, then unrolled the desk. She gave a little gasp of despair at what she saw. The papers were piled mountain-high, and the breeze that came from the rolling back of the desk stirred them like live things and blew many of them on to the floor. How was she ever to do anything with these? Where was she to begin? She gathered them up from the floor, and looking at the first fistful discovered bills, letters, invitation cards, theatre programmes, advertisements, some of them months old, many of them torn in half, and many more of them, as she quickly discovered, requests for money, food, and shelter. She felt an instant's complete despair, then her innate love of order and tidiness came to her rescue. She felt a real sense of pity and affection for Miss Platt. Of reassurance too, because here obviously was a place where she was needed, where she could be of real assistance and value. She piled them all on to the floor and then started to divide them into sections, invitations in one heap, begging letters in another, advertisements in another.

Strange enough, too, this sudden plunging into the intimacies of a woman whom until an hour ago she had not known at all! Many of the letters were signed with Christian names, but through all there ran an implicit and even touching belief that certainly 'Victoria,' 'dearest Viccy,' 'my darling little Vic,' 'dear Miss Platt' would find it possible to 'grant this humble request,' 'to loan the money

for only a few weeks when it should faithfully be repaid,' 'to stump up a pound or two—this really the last time of asking.'

Half-an-hour's investigation among these papers told Millie a great deal about Miss Platt. Soon she was deep in her task. The heavy marble clock in the big room muttered on like an irritable old man who hopes to get what he wants by asking for it over and over again.

She was soon caught into so complete an absorption in her work that she was unaware of her surroundings, only conscious that above her head Eve leered down upon her and that all the strange, even pathetic furniture of the room was accompanying her on her voyage of discovery, as though it wanted her to share in their own kindly, protective sense of their mistress. The clock ticked, the fire crackled, the sun fell in broad sheets of yellow across the hideous carpet of blue and crimson, quenching the fire's bright flames.

Ghosts rose about her—the ghosts of Victoria Platt's confused, greedy, self-seeking world. Millie soon began to long to catch some of these pirates by their throats and wring their avaricious necks. How they dared ! How they could ask as they did, again and again and again ! Ask ! nay, demand ! She who was of too proud a spirit to ask charity of any human being alive—unless possibly it were Henry, who, poor lamb, was singularly ill-fitted to be a benefactor—seemed, as she read on, to be receiving a revelation of a new world undreamt of before in her young philosophy. Her indignation grew, and at last to relieve her feelings she had to spring up from the desk and pace the room.

Suddenly, as she faced the windows to receive

for a moment the warmth and friendliness of the sunlight, the door opened behind her and, turning, she saw a woman enter.

This was some one apparently between thirty and forty years of age, dressed in rather shabby black, plain, with a pale face, black hair brushed severely from a high forehead, cross, discontented eyes and an air of scornful severity.

The two women made a strange contrast as they faced one another, Millicent with her youth, beauty and happiness, the other scowling, partly at the sudden sunlight, partly at the surprise of finding a stranger there.

'I beg your pardon,' said Millie, smiling. 'Do you want any one?'

'Do I want any one?' said the other, in a voice half-snarl, half-irony; 'that's good! In one's own house too!'

'Oh, I beg your pardon!' cried Millie, again blushing. 'I didn't know. I've only been here an hour. I'm Miss Platt's new secretary.'

'Oh, you are, are you? Well, I'm Miss Platt's old sister, and when I said it was my house I made of course the greatest possible mistake, because it isn't *my* house and never will be. You can call me a guest or a companion or even a prisoner if you like. Anything that it pleases you.'

This was said with such extreme bitterness that Millie thought that the sooner she returned to her work at the roll-top desk the better.

'You're Miss Ellen Platt?' she asked.

'I am. And what's your name?'

'Millicent Trenchard.'

'What on earth have you taken up this kind of work for?'

'Why shouldn't I?' asked Millie with spirit.

'Well, you're pretty and you're young and your clothes don't look exactly as though you're hard up. However, if you want to be imprisoned before your time there's no reason why I should prevent you!'

'I want to work!' said Millie, then, laughing, she added: 'And there seems to be plenty for me to do here!'

Ellen Platt seemed to be suddenly arrested by her laugh. She stared even more closely than she had done before. 'Yes, there's plenty of work,' she said. 'If Victoria will let you do it. If you last out a month here you'll do well.'

'Why, what's the matter with it?' asked Millie.

'You can't be very observant if it isn't enough for you to cast a glance round this room and tell yourself what's the matter. But I'll leave you to make your own discoveries. Six years ago we hadn't a penny to bless ourselves with and thought ourselves ill-used. Now we have more money than we know what to do with—or at least Victoria has—and we're worse off than we were before.'

She said those words 'Or at least Victoria has' with such concentrated anger and bitterness that Millie turned her head away.

'Yes, I expect having a lot of money suddenly is a trouble,' she said. 'I must be getting on with my work.'

She moved into the little room; Ellen Platt followed her as though determined to fire her last shot at close quarters.

'Victoria's had five secretaries in the last month,' she said. 'And they've none of them been able to

stand it a week, and they were older women than you,' then she went out, banging the door behind her.

'What an unpleasant woman,' thought Millie, then busied herself again in her work.

Her other interruption came half an hour later. The door opened, and there came in a man of medium height, bald, and with a bushy moustache so striking that it seemed as though he should have either more hair on his head or less over his mouth. He had twinkling eyes and was dressed in grey. He came across the room without seeing Millie, then started with surprise.

'Good heavens!' he said. 'A girl!'

'I'm Miss Platt's new secretary,' she said.

'And I'm Miss Platt's family physician,' he said through his moustache. 'My name's Brooker.' He added smiling, 'You seem in a bit of a mess there.'

She must have looked in a mess, the papers lying in tangled heaps on every side of her; to herself she seemed at last to be evoking order.

'I'm not in so much of a mess as I was an hour ago,' she said.

'No, I daresay.' He nodded his head. 'You look more efficient than the last secretary, who cried so often that all Miss Platt's correspondence looked as though it had been out in the rain.'

'What did she cry about?' asked Millie.

'Homesickness and indigestion and general confusion,' he answered. 'You don't look as though you'll cry.'

'I'm much more likely to smash Eve,' said Millie. 'Don't you think I might ask Miss Platt to have her moved back a little this afternoon? It's

so awful feeling that she's watching everything you do.'

'There's nowhere very much to have her moved back to,' said the doctor. 'She's back as far as she will go now. You're very young,' he added quite irrelevantly.

'I'm not,' said Millie. 'I'm twenty-five.'

'You don't look that. I don't want to be inquisitive, but — did you know anything about these people before you came here?'

'No,' said Millie. 'No more than one knows from a first impression. Why? You look concerned about me. Have I made a mistake?'

The doctor laughed. 'Not if you have a sense of humour and plenty of determination. The last four ladies lacked both those qualities. Mind you, I'm devoted to the family. Their father, poor old Joe, was one of my greatest friends.'

'Why do you pity him?' asked Millie quickly.

'Because he was one of those most unfortunate of human beings—a man who had one great ambition in life, worked for it all his days, realised it before he died, and found it dust in the mouth. The one thing he wanted from life was money. He was a poor man all his days until the War—then he made a corner in rum and made so much money he didn't know what to do with himself. The confusion and excitement of it all was too much for him and he died of apoplexy.

'Only the day before he died he said to me: "Tom, I've put my money on the wrong horse. I've been a fool all my life."'

'And he left his money to his daughters?' asked Millie.

'To Victoria, always his favourite. And he left

it to her to do just as she liked with and to behave as she pleased to her sisters.

'He had never cared about Clarice and Ellen. He was disappointed because they weren't boys.

'So Victoria's King of the Castle and knows she is, too; for all that she's a good, kind-hearted woman. Are you interested in human beings, Miss——?'

'Trenchard,' said Millie. 'I am.'

'Well, if you really are you've come to the right place. You won't find anything more interesting in the whole of London. Here you have right in front of your nose that curious specimen of the human family, the New Rich, and you have it in its most touching and moving aspect—frightened, baffled, confused, bewildered and plundered.

'Plundered! My God! you'll have plenty of opportunity of discovering the Plunderers in the next few weeks if you stay. There are some prime specimens here. If you're a good girl—and you don't look a bad one—you'll have a chance of saving Victoria. Another year like the one she's just gone through and I think she'll be in an asylum!'

'Oh poor thing!' cried Millie. 'Indeed I'm going to do my very best.'

'Mind you,' he went on, 'she's foolish—there never was a more foolish woman. And she can be a tyrant too. Clarice and Ellen have a hard time of it. But they take her the wrong way. They resent it that she should hold the purse, and they show her that they resent it. You can do anything you like with her if you make her fond of you. There never was a warmer-hearted woman.'

He went over to Millie's desk and stood close

to her. 'I'm telling you all this, Miss Trenchard,' he said, 'because I like the look of you. I believe you're just what's needed in this house. You've got all the enchantment of youth and health and beauty if you'll forgive my saying so. The Enchanted Age doesn't last very long, but those who are in it can do so much for those who are outside, and generally they are so taken up with their own excitement that they've no time to think of those others. You'll never regret it all your life if you do something for this household before you leave it.'

Millie was deeply touched. 'Of course I will,' she said, 'if I can. And you really think I can? I'm terribly ignorant and inexperienced.'

'You're not so inexperienced as they are.' He held out his hand. 'Come to me if you're disheartened or bewildered. There'll be times when you will be. I've known these women since they were babies, so I can help you.'

They shook hands on it.

CHAPTER IV

HENRY'S FIRST DAY

MEANWHILE Henry's plunge into a cold and hostile world was of quite another kind.

One of the deep differences between brother and sister was that while Millie was realistic Henry was romantic. He could not help seeing things in a coloured light, and now when he started out for his first morning with his Baronet London was all lit up like a birthday cake. He had fallen during the last year under the spell of the very newest of the *Vers Librists*, and it had become a passion with him to find fantastic images for everything that he saw. Moreover, the ease of it all fascinated him. He was, God knows, no poet, but quite simply, without any trouble at all, lines came tumbling into his head :

The chimneys, like crimson cockatoos,
Fling their grey feathers
Wildly.

Or

The washing
Billowing—
Frozen egg-shells
Crimson pantaloons
Skyline
Flutter.

Or

> The omnibuses herd together
> In the dirty autumn weather
> Elephants in jungle town
> Monkey-nuts come pattering down.

And so on and so on. . . .

He got deep pleasure from these inspirations ; he had sent three to an annual anthology *Hoops*, and one of them, ' Railway-Lines—Bucket-shop,' was to appear in the 1920 volume.

But the trouble with Henry was that cheek by jowl with this modern up-to-date impulse ran a streak of real old-fashioned, entirely out-of-date Romance. It was true, as Millie had informed Miss Platt, that he had written ten chapters of a story, *The House in the Lonely Wood*.

How desperately was he ashamed of his impulse to write this romance and yet how at the same time he loved doing it ! Was ever young literary genius in a more shameful plight ! A true case of double personality ! With the day he pursued the path of all the young 1920 Realists, believing that nothing matters but ' the Truth, the calm, cold, unaffected Truth,' thrilling to the voices of the Three Graces, loving the company of the somewhat youthful editor of *Hoops*, reading every word that fell from the pen of the younger realistic critics.

And then at night out came the other personality, and Henry, hair on end, the penny bottle of ink in front of him, pursued, alas happily and with the divine shining behind his eyelids, the simple path of unadulterated, unashamed Romance !

What would the Three Graces say, how would the editor of *Hoops* regard him, did they know what he did night after night in the secrecy of his own

chamber, or rather of Mr. King's chamber? Perhaps they would not greatly care—they did not in any case consider him as of any very real importance. Nevertheless he could not but feel that he was treating them to double-dealing.

And then his trouble was suddenly healed by the amazing, overwhelming adventure of Piccadilly Circus. As he had discovered at the Hunters' party, nothing now mattered but the outcome of that adventure. He worked at his Romance with redoubled vigour; it did not seem to him any longer a shameful affair, simply because he had now in his own experience a Romance greater and wilder than any fancy could give him. Also images and similes occurred to him more swiftly than ever, and they were no longer modern, no longer had any connection with *Hoops* or the new critics, but were simply the attempts that his own soul was making to clothe Her and everything about Her, even Her horrible mother, with all the beauty and colour that his genius could provide. (Henry did not really, at this time, doubt that he had genius—the doubting time was later.)

It will be seen then that he started for Sir Charles Duncombe's house in a very romantic spirit.

The address was No. 13 Hill Street, Berkeley Square, so that Henry had a very little way to go from his Panton Street room. Hill Street is a bright, cheerful place enough, with a sense of dignity and age about it and a consciousness that it knows only the very best people. Even the pillar-boxes and the lamp-posts call for decorum, and are accustomed, you can see, to butlers, footmen, and very superior ladies'-maids. But it cannot be denied that many of the Hill Street houses

are dark inside, and No. 13 is no exception to that rule. Unlike most of the Hill Street houses which often change masters, No. 13 had been in the possession of the Duncombe family for a great many years, ever since the days of Queen Anne,—in fact, the days of the famous Richard Duncombe who, being both the most desperate gambler and the astutest brain for a bargain in all London, made and lost fortunes with the greatest frequency.

Henry on this first morning knew nothing about the family history of the Duncombes, but if he had known he might have readily believed that so far as the hall and the butler went no change whatever had been made since those polished Queen Anne days. The hall was so dark and the butler so old that Henry dared neither to move lest he should fall over something, nor to speak lest it should seem irreverent. He stood, therefore, rooted to the stone floor and muttered something so inaudibly that the old man courteously waiting could not hear at all.

'Henry Trenchard,' he said at last, looking wildly about him. How the cold seemed to strike up through the stone flags into his very marrow!

'Quite so, sir,' said the old man. 'Sir Charles is expecting you.'

Up an enormous stone staircase they went, Henry's boots making a great clatter, his teeth against his will chattering. Portraits looked down upon him, but so dark it was that he could only catch a glimmer of their old gold frames.

To Henry, modern though he might endeavour to be, there would recur persistently that picture—the most romantic picture perhaps in all his childish

picture-gallery—of Alan Fairford, sick and ill, dragged by Nanty Ewart through the dying avenues of Fairladies, having at long last that interview with the imperious Father Buonaventure in the long gallery of the crumbling house—the interview, the secret letter, the mysterious lady 'whose step was that of a queen.' 'Whose neck and bosom were admirably formed, and of a dazzling whiteness'—the words still echoed in Henry's heart, calling from that far day when a tiny boy in his attic at Garth he read by the light of a dipping candle the history of *Redgauntlet* from a yellowing closely-printed page.

Here, in the very heart of London, was Fairladies once again and, who could tell? . . . Might not the spring in the wall be touched, a bookcase step aside and a lady, 'her neck and bosom of a dazzling whiteness,' appear? For shame! He had now his own lady. The time had gone by for dreams. He came to reality with a start, finding himself in a long dusky library so thickly embedded with old books that the air was scented with the crushed aroma of old leather bindings. A long oak table confronted him, and behind the table, busily engaged with writing, was his new master.

The old man muttered something and was gone. Sir Charles did not look up, and Henry, his heart beating fast, was able to study his surroundings. The library was all that the most romantic soul could have wished it. The ceiling was high and stamped with a gold pattern. A gallery about seven feet from the ground ran round the room, and a little stairway climbed up to this; except for the high diamond-paned windows on one side of the room the bookcases completely covered the

walls; thousands upon thousands of old books glimmered behind their gold tooling, the gold running like a thin mist from wall to wall.

Above the wide stone fireplace there was a bust of a sharp-nosed gentleman in wig and stock, very supercilious and a little dusty.

With all this Henry also took surreptitious peeps at Sir Charles, and what he saw did not greatly reassure him. He was a thin man, dressed in deep black and a high white collar that would in other days have been called Gladstonian, bald, tight-lipped, and with the same peaked bird-like nose as the gentleman above the fireplace. He gave an impression of perfect cleanness, neatness and order. Everything on the table, letter-weight, reference-books, paper-knife, silver ink-bottle, pens and sealing-wax, was arranged so definitely that these things might have been stuck on to the table with glue. Sir Charles's hands were long, thin, and bird-shaped like his nose. Henry, as he snatched glimpses of this awe-inspiring figure, was acutely conscious of his own deficiencies; he felt tumbled, rumpled, and crumpled, whereas only a quarter of an hour ago walking down Hill Street he had felt debonair, smart, and fashionable (far, of course, from what he really was), so unhappily impressionable was he.

Suddenly the hand was raised, the pen laid carefully down, the nose shot out across the table.

'You are Mr. Trenchard?' asked a voice that made Henry feel as though he were a stiff sheet of paper being slowly cut by a very sharp knife.

'Yes, sir,' he said.

'Very well. . . . We have only corresponded hitherto. Mr. Mark is your cousin, I think?'

'My brother-in-law, sir.'

'Quite. A very able fellow. He should go far.'

Henry had never cared for Philip, who, in his own private opinion, should have never gone any distance at all, but on the present occasion he could only offer up a very ineffective 'Yes.'

'Very well. You have never been anybody's secretary before?'

'No, sir.'

'And you understand that I am giving you a month's trial entirely on your brother-in-law's recommendation?'

'Yes, sir.'

'And what'—here the nose shot out and forward in most alarming fashion—'do you understand a secretary's duties to be?'

Henry smiled rather to give himself confidence than for any other very definite reason. 'Well, sir, I should say that you would want me to write letters to your dictation and keep your papers in order and, perhaps, to interview people whom you don't wish to see yourself, and—and—possibly to entrust me with missions of importance.'

'Hum. . . . Quite. . . . I understand that you can typewrite and that you know shorthand?'

'Well, sir'—here Henry smiled again—'I think I had better be frank with you from the beginning. I don't typewrite very well. I told Philip not to lay much emphasis on that. And my shorthand is pretty quick, but I can't generally read it afterwards.'

'Indeed! And would you mind telling me why, with these deficiencies, you fancied that you would make me a good secretary?'

Henry's heart sank. He saw himself within the next five minutes politely ushered down the stone staircase, through the front door and so out into Hill Street.

'I don't think,' he said, 'that I will make you a very good secretary, not in the accepted sense. I know that I shall make mistakes and be clumsy and forgetful, but I will do my very best and you can trust me, and—I am really not such a fool as I often look.'

These were the very last words that Henry had intended to say. It was as though some one else had spoken them for him. Now he had ruined his chances. There was nothing for it but to accept his dismissal and go.

However, Sir Charles seemed to take it all as the most natural thing in the world.

'Quite,' he said. 'Your brother-in-law tells me that you are an author.'

'I'm not exactly one yet,' said Henry. 'I hope to be one soon, but of course the War threw me back.'

'And what kind of an author do you intend to be?'

'I mean to be a novelist,' said Henry, feeling quite sure that this was the very last thing that Sir Charles would ever consider any one ought to be.

'Exactly. And you will I suppose be doing your own work when you ought to be doing mine?'

'No, I won't,' said Henry eagerly. 'I can't pretend that I won't sometimes be thinking of it. It's very hard to keep it out of one's head sometimes. But I'll do my best not to.'

'Quite. . . . Won't you sit down?' Henry sat down on a stiff-backed chair.

'If you will kindly listen I will explain to you what I shall wish you to do for me. As you have truly suggested I shall need some help with my letters; some typing also will be necessary. But the main work I have in hand for you is another matter. My grandfather, Ronald Duncombe, was a Writer to the Signet in Edinburgh during the first thirty years of the nineteenth century. He was a great letter-writer, and knew all the most interesting personalities of his time. You, doubtless, like all the new generation, despise your parents and laugh at your grandparents.' Sir Charles paused here as though he expected an answer to a question.

'Oh no,' said Henry hurriedly. 'My grandfather is dead—he died a few years ago—but he was a very fine old man indeed. We all thought a great deal of him.'

'I'm glad to hear it. That will make you perhaps the more sympathetic to this work that I have for you. There are several black boxes in the cupboard over there filled with letters. Walter Scott was an intimate friend of his—of course, you despise Walter Scott?'

'Oh no,' said Henry fervently, 'I don't, I assure you.'

'Hum. . . . Quite. . . . When one of you young men writes something better than he did I'll begin to read you. Not before.'

'No,' said Henry, who nevertheless longed to ask Sir Charles how he knew that the young men of to-day did not write better seeing that he never read them.

'In those boxes there are letters from Byron and Wordsworth and Crabbe and Hogg and many

other great men of the time. There are also many letters of no importance. I intend to edit my grandfather's letters, and I wish you to prepare them for me.'

'Yes,' said Henry.

'I wish you to be here punctually at nine every morning. I may say that I consider punctuality of great importance. You will help me with my own correspondence until ten-thirty; from ten-thirty until one you will be engaged on my grandfather's letters. My sister will be very glad that you should have luncheon with us whenever you care to. I shall not generally require you in the afternoon, but sometimes I shall expect you to remain here all day. I shall wish you always to be free to do so when I need you.'

'Yes, sir,' said Henry.

'Sometimes I shall be at Duncombe Hall in Wiltshire and shall want you to stay with me there at certain periods. I hope that you will not ask more questions than are absolutely necessary, as I dislike being disturbed. You are, of course, at liberty to use any books in this library that you please, but I hope that you will always put them back in their right places. I dislike very much seeing books bent back or laid face downwards.'

'Yes,' said Henry. 'So do I.'

'Quite. . . . And now, are there any questions that you would like to ask?'

'No,' said Henry. 'If there are any questions that I want to ask would you prefer that I asked them when I thought of them or kept them until the end of the morning and asked them all together?'

'That had better depend on your own judgement.'

There was a pause.

'That table over there,' said Sir Charles, pointing to one near the window, 'is a good one for you to work at. I should suggest that you begin this morning with the box labelled 1816–1820. That is the cupboard to your right. It is not locked.'

The first movement across the floor to the cupboard was an agonising one. Henry felt as though everything in the room were listening to him and as though the gentleman with the nose on the mantelpiece was saying to him: 'You'll never do here. Hark at the noise your boots make. Of course you won't do.'

However, he got safely across, opened the cupboard which creaked viciously, found the black boxes and the one that he needed. It was very heavy, but he brought it to the table without much noise. Down he sat, carefully opened it and looked inside. Pile upon pile of old yellow letters lay there, packet after packet of them tied with faded red tape. Something within him thrilled to their age, to their pathos, to their humility, to the sense that they carried up to him of the swift passing of time, the touching childishness of human hopes, despairs, and ambitions. He felt suddenly like an ant crawling laboriously over a gleaming and slippery globe of incredible vastness. The letters seemed to rebuke him as though he had been boasting of his pride and youth and his confidence in his own security. He took out the first bundle, reverently undid the tape, and began to read. . . .

Soon he was absorbed even as his sister Millicent, at that same moment in the Cromwell Road, was absorbed in a very different collection of letters,

on this her second Platt morning. The library with its thousands of books enfolded Henry as though now it approved of him and might love him did he stay reverently in its midst caring for the old things and the old people—the old things that pass, the old people who seem to die but do not. At first every letter thrilled him. The merest note :

15 CASTLE ST., EDINBURGH,
June 4, 1816.

MY DEAR RONALD—What about coming in to see us ? All at Hartley well and easy—Mamma has been in Edinburgh after a cook—no joking matter—and to see Benjie who was but indifferent, but has recovered. . . . I will write a long letter soon, but my back and eyes ache with these three pages. . . .

Then a note about a dinner-party, then about a parcel of books, then a letter from Italy full of the glories of Florence ; then (how Henry shivered with pleasure as he saw it !) the hand and sign of the Magician himself !

DEAR SIR RONALD DUNCOMBE—I am coming to town I trust within the fortnight, but my trees are holding me here for the moment. I have been saddened lately by the death of my poor brother, Major John Scott, who was called home after a long illness. All here wish to be remembered to you.—Most truly yours,

WALTER SCOTT.

A terrible temptation came to Henry—so swift that it seemed to be suggested by some one sitting beside him—to slip the letter into his pocket. This was the first time in all his days that he had had such a letter in his hand, because, although his father had been for many years a writer of books on this very period, his material had been second-

hand, even third-hand material. Henry felt a slight contempt for his father as he sat there.

Then, as the minutes swung past, he was aware that he should be doing something more than merely looking at the old letters and complimenting them on their age and pretty pathos. He should be arranging them. Yes, arranging them, but how? He began helplessly to pick them up, look at them and lay them on the table again. Many of them had no dates at all, many were signed only with Christian names, some were not signed at all. And how was he to decide on the important ones? How did he know that he would not pass, through ignorance and inexperience, some signature of world-significance? The letters began to look at him, with less approval, even with a certain cynical malevolence. They all looked the same with their faded yellow paper and their confusing handwriting. He had many of them on the table, unbound from their red tape, lying loosely about him, and yet the box seemed as full as ever. And there were many more boxes! . . . Suddenly, from the very bowels of the house, a gong sounded.

'You can wash your hands in that little room to the right,' said Sir Charles, whose personality suddenly returned as though Henry had pressed a button. 'Luncheon will be waiting for us.'

And this was the conclusion of Henry's first appearance as a private secretary.

CHAPTER V

THE THREE FRIENDS

Upon the afternoon of that same day at five of the clock they were gathered together in Mr. King's friendly attic—Henry, Millicent, and Westcott. Because there was so little room Henry and Millie sat on the bed, Peter Westcott having the honour of the cane-bottomed chair, which looked small enough under his large square body.

The attic window was open and the spring afternoon sun came in, bringing with it, so Henry romantically fancied, a whiff from the flower-baskets in Piccadilly and the bursting buds of the St. James's Church trees—also petrol from the garage next door and, as Peter asserted, patchouli and orange-peel from the Comedy Theatre.

At first, as is often the case with tea-parties, there was a little stiffness. It was absurd that on this occasion it should be so ; nevertheless the honest fact was that Millie did not care very greatly for Peter and that Henry knew this. She did not care for him, Henry contended, because she did not know him, and this might be because in all their lives they had only met once or twice, Millie generally making some excuse when she knew that Peter would be present.

Was this jealousy? Indignantly she would have denied it. Rather she would have said that it was because she did not think that he made a very good friend for her dear Henry. He was, in her eyes, a rather battered, grumpy, sulky, middle-aged man who was here married and there not married at all, distinctly a failure, immoral probably, and certainly a cynic. None of these things would she mind for herself, of course, but Henry was so much younger than she, so much more innocent, she happily fancied, about the wicked ways of the world. Westcott would spoil him, take the bloom off him, make him old before his time—that is what she liked to tell him. And perhaps if they had not met on this especial afternoon that little barrier would never have been leaped, but to-day they had so much to tell and to hear that restraint was soon impossible, and Henry himself had so romantic a glow in his eyes, and his very hair, that it made at once the whole meeting exceptional. This glow was indeed the very first thing that Millie noticed.

'Why, Henry,' she said as soon as she sat down on the bed, 'what *has* happened to you?'

He was swinging on the bed, hugging his knees.

'There's nothing the matter,' he said. 'I'm awfully happy, that's all.'

'Happy because of the Baronet?'

'No, not so much the Baronet, although he's all right, and it's awfully interesting if I can only do the work. No, it's something else. I'll tell you all about it when we've had tea. I say, Millie, how stunning you look in that orange jumper. You ought always to wear orange. Oughtn't she, Peter?'

'Yes,' said Peter, his eyes fixed gravely upon her.

Millie flushed a little. She didn't want Westcott's approval. A nuisance that he was here at all! It would be so much easier to discuss everything with Henry were he not here.

Mr. King arrived, very solemn, very superior, very dead.

He put down the tray upon the rather rickety little table. They all watched him in silence. When he had gone Henry chuckled.

'He thinks I'm awful,' Henry said. 'Too awful for anything. I don't suppose he's ever despised any one before as he despises me, and it makes him happy. He loves to have some one who's awful. And now about Miss Platt—every bit about Miss Platt from her top to her toe!'

He went to the tea-table and began to pour out the tea, wishing that Millie and Peter would like one another better and not look so cross.

Millie began. She had come that afternoon burning to tell everything about the Platt household, and then when she saw Westcott there she was closed like an oyster. However, for Henry's sake she must do something, so she began, because in her own way she was as truly creative as Henry was in his. She found that she was enjoying herself and it grew under her hand, the Platt house, the Platt rooms, the Platt family, Victoria and Ellen and Clarice, and the little doctor and Beppo and the housekeeper and the statue of Eve and all the letters. . . .

They began to laugh; she was laughing so that she could not speak, and Henry was laughing so that the two brazen and unsympathetic muffins

which Mr. King had provided fell on to the carpet, and then Peter laughed, and laughed more than that, and more again, and any ice that there had ever been was cracked, riven, utterly smashed!

They all fell into the Pond together and found it so warm and comfortable that they decided to stay there for the rest of the afternoon.

'Of course,' said Millie, 'it entirely remains to be seen whether I'm up to the job. I'm not even sure that I can manage the correspondence, I'm almost certain that I can't manage the servants. The housekeeper hates me already—and then there are the sisters.'

'Ellen and Clarice.'

Millie nodded her head. 'They *are* queer. But then the situation's queer. Victoria's got all the money and likes the power. They have to do what she says or leave the house and start all alone in a cold and unsympathetic world. They couldn't do that, they couldn't earn their livings for five minutes. Clarice thinks she can sing and act. You should hear her! Ellen does little but sulk. Victoria gives them fine big allowances, but she likes to feel they are her slaves. They'd give anything for their freedom, marry anybody anywhere —but they *won't* plunge! How can they? They'd starve in a week.'

'And would their sister let them?' asked Peter.

'No, I don't think she would,' said Millie. 'But she'd have them back and they'd be no better off than before. She's a kind-hearted creature, but just loves the power her money gives her—and hasn't the least idea what to do with it! She's as bewildered as though, after being in a dark room

all her life, she were suddenly flung into the dancing-hall in Hampstead. . . . Oh, it's a queer time ! '

Millie sprang up from the bed.

' Every one's bewildered, the ones that have money and didn't have it, the ones that haven't money and used to have it, the ones with ideas and the ones without, the ones with standards and the ones without, the cliché ones and the old-fashioned ones, the ones that want fun and the ones that want to pray, the ugly ones and the pretty ones, the bold ones and the frightened ones. . . . Everything's breaking up and everything's turning into new shapes and new colours. And I love it ! I love it ! I love it ! I oughtn't to, it's wrong to, I can't help it ! . . . It's enchanting ! '

As she stood there, the sun streaming in upon her from the little window and illuminating her gay colours and her youth and health and beauty, she seemed to Peter Westcott a sudden flame and fire burning there in that little attic, to show to the world that youth never dies, that life is eternal, that hope and love and beauty are stronger than governments and wars and the changing of forms and boundaries. It was an unforgettable moment to him, and even though it emphasised all the more his own loneliness it seemed to whisper to him that that loneliness would not be for ever.

' Hold on ! ' said Henry. ' Look out, Millie ! The table's very shaky, and if the plates are broken King will make me pay at least twice what they're worth. You know it's a funny thing, but I'm seeing just the other side of the picture. Your people have just got all their money, my people have just lost all theirs. Before the War, so far as I can make out, Duncombe was quite well off. Most of it came

from land, and that's gone down and the Income Tax has come up, and there's hardly anything left. They think they'll have to sell Duncombe Hall, which has been in the family for centuries, and that will pretty well break their hearts I fancy.'

'They? Who's they?' asked Millie.

'There's a sister,' said Henry, 'Lady Bell-Hall —Margaret. She's the funniest little woman you ever saw. She's a widow. Her husband died in the war—of general shock I should fancy—air-raids and money and impertinence from the lower classes. The widow nearly died from the same thing. She always wears black and a bonnet, and jumps if any one makes the least sound. At the same time she's as proud as Lucifer and good too. She's just bewildered. She can't understand things at all. The word written on her heart when she comes to die will be Bolshevist. She talks all the time, and it's from her I know all this.'

'And Duncombe himself? What's he like?' asked Millie.

'Oh, he's queer! I like him, but I can't make out what he thinks. He never shows any sign. He will, I suppose, before long. I shall make so many muddles and mistakes that I shall just be shown the door at the end of the month. However, he can't say I didn't warn him. I told him from the beginning just what I was. I know I'm going to have an awful time with those letters. They all look so exactly alike, and many of them haven't got any dates at all, and then I go off dreaming. It's almost impossible not to in that library. It's full of ghosts, and the letters are full of ghosts as well. And I'm sorry for those two. It must be awful, everything that you believe in going, the only world

you've ever known coming to an end before your eyes, every one denying all the things you've believed in and laughing at them. He's brave, old Duncombe. He'll go down fighting.'

'And what's the other thing,' said Millie, sitting down on the bed again, 'that you were going to tell me?'

Henry told his adventure. He did not look at Millie as he told it; he did not want to see whether she approved or disapproved; he was afraid that she would laugh—she laughed at so many things—and most of all he was afraid lest she should say something about the girl. If she did say anything he would have to stand it.

After all Millie had not seen her. . . . So he talked, staring at the little pink clouds that were now forming beyond the window just over the 'Comedy' roof—they were like lumps of coral against the sky—three, four, five . . . then they merged into two billowing pillows of colour, slowly fading into a deep crimson, then breaking into long strips of orange lazily forming against a blue that grew paler and paler and at last, as he ended, was white like water under glass.

He stopped.

'How long ago was all this?' Millie asked at last.

'Two days back.'

'Have you seen her since?'

'No. I've been round that street several times. I know it by heart. I haven't dared go up—not so soon again.'

'I wish I'd seen her,' Millie said slowly. Then she added: 'Anyway you must go on with it, Henry. You've promised to help her, and so of

course you must. If she's taking you in, it will do you good to be taken in. It will teach you not to be such an ass another time. If she's not taking you in——'

'Of course she's not taking me in,' Henry answered hotly. 'I know that you and Peter think me a baby and that I haven't any idea of things. You've always thought that, Millie, but I'm sure I don't know what you base it on. I'm hardly ever wrong. Wasn't I right about Philip? Isn't he just the prig I always thought him, and didn't he take Katherine away from us and break us all up just as I said he would?

'And as to girls, you both look so learned as though you knew such a lot, but when have I ever been foolish about girls? I've never cared the least bit about them until now. I've been waiting, I think, until she came along. Because I'm not always tidy and break things, you both think I'm an ass. But I'm not an ass, as I'll show you.'

Millie went across to him and kissed him on the forehead.

'Of course I don't think you an ass. But you *are* easily taken in by people—you always believe what they say.'

Henry nodded his head. 'Perhaps I don't so much as I mean to. But it's the best thing to try to. You get far more that way.'

The three sat there in silence. At last Millicent said:

'Isn't it queer? Here's the world on the very edge of every sort of adventure, and here are we on the very edge too. I feel in my bones that we shall go through great things this year—all of us. Unpleasant and pleasant—all sorts. I don't believe

that there's ever been in all history such a time for adventure as now.'

Henry jumped up from behind the table.

'That's true!' he cried. 'And whatever happens we three will stick together. Nothing shall separate us — nothing, and nobody. You and I and Peter. We'll never let anybody come between us. We'll be the three best friends the world has ever seen!'

He caught Millie's hand. She looked up at him, smiling. He came across and caught Peter's also. Suddenly Millie put out hers and took Peter's free one.

'You're a sentimental donkey, Henry,' she said. 'But there's something in what you say.'

Peter flushed. 'I'm older than both of you,' he said, 'and I'm dull and slow, but I'll do what I can.'

There was a knock on the door and they sprang apart. It was Mr. King to take away the tea.

BOOK II

HIGH SUMMER

CHAPTER I

SECOND PHASE OF THE ADVENTURE

Now might young Henry be considered by any observer of average intelligence to be fairly launched into the world—he is in love, he is confidential secretary to a gentleman of importance, he has written ten chapters of a romantic novel, and he is living in chambers all on his own. It has been asserted again and again that the Great War of 1914 turned many thousands of boys into old men long before their time. The exact contrary may also be proved to be true—namely, that the War caught many boys in their teens, held them in a sort of vice for five years, keeping them from life as it is usually lived, teaching them nothing but war, and then suddenly flinging them out into a Peace about which they were as ignorant as blind puppies. Boys of eighteen chronologically supposed to be twenty-four and superficially disguised as men of forty, and disillusioned cynical men at that, those were to be found in their thousands in that curious tangled year of 1920. Henry thought he was a man ; he was much less a man than he would have been had no war broken out at all.

On the afternoon following the tea-party just now described he left Hill Street about four o'clock,

his head up and his chest out, a very fine figure indeed had it not been that, unknown to himself, his tie had stepped up to the top of his collar at the back of his neck and there was a small smudge of ink just in the right corner of his nose. He had had a very happy day, very quiet, very peaceful, and he was encouraged to believe that he had been a great success. It was true that Sir Charles had addressed very few words to himself and that Lady Bell-Hall had addressed so many during luncheon that he had felt like a canary peppered with bird-seed, but he did not expect Sir Charles to speak very often, nor did he mind how frequently the funny little woman in the bonnet spoke, so long as she liked him. It had all been very easy, and the letters had been entrancing, so entrancing that Berkeley Square seemed to be Princes Street, and he could see through the open door Sir Walter's hall and Maria Edgeworth announced, and the host's cheery welcome and glorious smile, and the laughter of the children, and Maria dragged into the circle and forced to sing the Highland song with the rest of them, and Honest John hurrying down Castle Street wrapped up against the cold, and the high frosty sky and the Castle frowning over all.

He had been there—surely he had been there in an earlier incarnation, and now this. . . . He was pulled up by a taxi ringing at him fiercely, and by the press of carriages at the Piccadilly turning.

He was swung suddenly on to the business of the moment, namely, that he was going to make his first serious attempt at breaking through into the mysteries of Peter Street, then definitely to do or die—although as a matter of honest fact he had

no intention whatever of dying just yet. He was borne into Shaftesbury Avenue before he knew where he was, borne by the tide of people, men and women happy in the bright purple-hued spring afternoon, happy in spite of the hard times and the uncertain future, borne along, too, by the cries and sounds, the roll of the omnibuses, the screams of the taxis, the shouting of the newsboys, the murmur of countless voices, the restless rhythm of the unceasing life beneath the brick and mortar, the life of the primeval forests, the ghosts of the serpents and the lions waiting with confident patience for the earth to return to them once more.

He slipped into Peter Street as into a country marked off from the rest of the world and known to him by heart. This afternoon the barrows and stalls were away; no one was there, not even the familiar policeman. It was like a back-water hidden from the main river and its traffic by the thick barrier of the forest trees, gleaming in its own sunlight, happy in its solitude. He found the bell, listened to it go tinkling into the depths of the house, and after its cessation heard only the thumping of his own heart and the shattered beat of the unresting town.

He waited, it seemed, an unconscionable time; then slowly the door opened, revealing to his astonished gaze the girl herself. So staggered was he by her appearance that for the moment he could only stare. The passage behind her was dark in spite of the strong afternoon sun.

'Oh!' he said at last. 'I came. . . . I came. . . .'

She looked at him.

'Have you come to see my mother?' The tiny

slur of the foreign accent excited him as it had done before. It seemed suddenly that he had known her for ever.

'Because if you have,' she went on, 'mother's out.'

'No,' he said boldly, 'I've come to see you.'

She looked back to the stairs as though she were afraid that some one were lurking there and would overhear them. She dropped her voice a little.

'Oh, I don't know,' she said. 'Mother . . .' Then hurriedly, 'Come up. Come up. I don't like being alone and that's the truth. If mother's angry when she comes in I don't care. Anything's better.'

She turned and led the way. He followed her, smelling the stuffiness that was like dirty blankets pressed against his nose. There was no window to the stairs, and at the corner it was so dark that he stumbled. He heard her laugh in the distance, then an opened door threw light down. He was in the room where he had been before, enwrapped still in its heavy curtains, and lit even on this lovely day with electric light heavily clouded under the pink silk shades. She was still laughing, standing at the other side of the table.

He stood awkwardly fingering his hat. He had nothing to say, and they were both silent a long time. Then, simply because he was expecting the hated woman's arrival at any moment, he began :

'I've been wanting to come all these three days. I've thought of nothing else, of how you said I could help you and—and—get you out of this. I will. I will—I'll do anything. You can come now if you like, and I'll take you to my sister's—she's very nice and you'll like her—and they can

do anything they like, but they shan't take you away. . . .'

He was quite breathless with excitement. She stared at him gravely as though not understanding what he said. When he saw the puzzle in her eyes his eloquence was suddenly exhausted and he could only stammer out :

'That's—that's what you said the other day—that you wanted to escape.'

'To escape ?' she repeated.

'You said that.'

She moved her hands impatiently, and her voice dropped until it was almost a whisper.

'When you came the other day I was foolish because mother had just been angry. I was excited because she had been angry before that horrid fat woman—you remember ? I hate her to be angry when she's there, because she likes it. She hates me because I'm young and she's old. . . . Of course I can't get away—and how could I go with you ? I don't know you. Why, you're only a boy !' Then she added reflectively, as though she were giving the final conclusive argument, 'And you've got ink on your nose.'

Henry committed then what is always a foolish-seeming act at the very best, he took out a not very clean handkerchief, licked a corner of it with his tongue and rubbed his nose.

'It's on the right side in the corner,' she said, regarding him.

'Is it off now ?' he asked her.

'Yes.'

Henry then pulled himself together and behaved like a man.

'I don't know what you mean now,' he said,

'about not wanting me to help you, but you did say that the other day and you must take the consequences. I don't want to help you in any way, of course, that you don't want to be helped, but I am sure there is something I can do for you. And in any case I'm going on coming to see you until I'm stopped by physical force—even then I'm going on coming.'

'I'll tell you this,' she said suddenly. 'I don't want you to come because mother wants you to, and every one whom mother wants me to like is horrid. Why does *she* want you to come?'

'I'm sure I don't know,' said Henry, surprised. 'She can't know anything about me at all.'

'She does. She's found out in these two days. She said yesterday afternoon she wondered you hadn't come, and then this morning again.'

Henry said: 'Won't you take me as I am? Your mother doesn't know me. I want to be *your* friend. I've wanted to from the first moment I saw you in Piccadilly Circus.'

'In Piccadilly Circus?'

'Yes. That's where I first saw you the other afternoon and I followed you here.'

That seemed to her of no importance. 'Friend?' she said, frowning and staring in front of her. 'I don't like that word. Two or three have wanted to be friends. I won't have friends. I won't have anybody. I'd rather be alone.'

'I can't hurt you,' said Henry very simply. 'Why, every one laughs at me, even my sister who's very fond of me. They won't laugh one day, of course, but you see how it is. There's always ink on my nose, or I tumble down when I want to do something important. You'd have

thought the army would have changed that, but it didn't.'

She smiled then. 'No, you don't look as though you'd hurt anybody. But I don't want to trust people. It only means you're disappointed again.'

'You can't be disappointed in me,' Henry said earnestly. 'Because I'm just what you see. Please let me come and see you. I want it more than I've ever wanted anything in my life.'

Then they both heard steps on the stair. They stopped and listened. The room was at once ominous, alarmed.

Henry felt danger approaching, as though he could see beyond the door with his eyes and found on the stair some dark shape, undefined and threatening. The steps came nearer and ceased. Two were there listening on the other side of the door as two were listening within the room.

He felt the girl's fear, and that suddenly stiffened his own courage. It was almost ludicrous then when the door opened and revealed the stout Mrs. Jenssen, clothed now in light orange, and with her an old man.

Henry saw at once that however eagerly she had hitherto expected him she was not easy at his presence just now. His further glance at the old man showed him at once an enemy for life. In any case he did not like old men. The War had carried him with the rest upon the swing of that popular cry, 'Every one over seventy to the lethal chamber.'

Moreover, he personally knew no old men, which made the cry much simpler. This old man was not over seventy, he might indeed be still

under sixty, but his small peak of a white beard, his immaculate clothing, and his elegantly pointed patent-leather shoes were sufficient for Henry. Immaculate old men! How dared they wear anything but sackcloth and ashes?

Mrs. Jenssen, whose orange garments shone with ill-temper, shook hands with Henry as though she expected him instantly to say, 'Well, I must be going now,' but he found himself with an admirable pugnacity and defiant resolve.

'I called as I said I would,' he observed pleasantly. 'And I came in by the door and not by the window,' he added, laughing.

She murmured something, but did not attempt to introduce him to her companion.

He meanwhile had advanced with rather mincing steps to the girl, was bowing over her hand and then, to Henry's infinite disgust, was kissing it. Then Henry forgot all else in his adoration of the girl. He will never forget, to the end of whatever life that may be granted him, the picture that she made at that moment, standing in the garish, overlighted room, like a queen in her aloofness from them all, from everything that life could offer if that room, that old man, that woman were truly typical of its gifts. 'It wasn't only,' Henry said afterwards to Peter, 'that she was beautiful. Millie's beautiful—more beautiful I suppose than Christina. But Millie is flesh and blood. You can believe that she has toothache. But it was like a spell, a witchery. The beastly old man himself felt it. As though he had tried to step on sacred ground and was thrown back to common earth again. By gad, Peter, you don't know how stupid he suddenly looked—and how beastly! She's

remote, a vision—not perhaps for any one to touch —ever . . . !'

'That,' said Peter, 'is because you're in love with her—and Millie's your sister.'

'No, there's more than that. It may be partly because she's a foreigner—but you'd feel the same if you saw her. Her remoteness, as though the more towards her you moved the farther away she'd be. Always in the distance and knowing that you can come no nearer. And yet if she knew that really she wouldn't be so frightened as she is. . . .'

'It's all because you're so young, Henry,' Peter ended up.

But young or no Henry just then wasn't very happy. The old man with his shrill voice and his ironic, almost cynical determination to be pleased with everything that any one did or said (it came, maybe, from a colossal and patronising arrogance) reminded Henry of the old 'nicky-nacky' Senator in Otway's *Venice Preserved* which he had once seen performed by some amateur society. He remained entirely unclouded by Mrs. Jenssen's obvious boredom and ill-temper, moods so blatantly displayed that Henry in spite of himself was crushed.

The girl showed no signs of any further interest in the company.

Mrs. Jenssen sat at the table, picking her teeth with a toothpick and saying, 'Indeed!' or 'Well I never!' in an abstracted fashion when the old man's pauses seemed to demand something. Her bold eyes moved restlessly round the room, pausing upon things as though she hated them and sometimes upon Henry who was standing,

indeterminately, first on one foot and then on another. Something the old man said seemed suddenly to rouse her :

'Well, that's not fair, Mr. Leishman—it's not indeed. That's as good as saying that you think I'm mean—it is indeed. Oh yes, it is. You can accuse me of many things—I'm not perfect—but meanness ! Well, you ask my friends. You ask my friend Mrs. Armstrong who's known me as long as any one has—almost from the cradle you might say. Mean ! You ask her. Why, only the other day, the day Mr. Prothero was here and that young nephew of his, she said, "Of all the generous souls on this earth, for real generosity and no half-and-half about it, you give me Katie Jenssen." Of course, she's a friend as you might say, and partial perhaps—but still that's what she said and——'

The old man had been trying again and again to interrupt this flood. At last, because Mrs. Jenssen was forced to take a breath, he broke in :

'No. No. Indeed not. Dear, dear, what a mistake ! The last thing I was suggesting.'

'Well, I hope so, I'm sure.' The outburst over Mrs. Jenssen relapsed into teeth-picking again.

Henry saw that there was nothing more to be got from the situation just then.

'I must be going,' he said. 'Important engagement.'

Mrs. Jenssen shook him by the hand. She regarded him with a wider amiability now that he was departing.

'Come and see us again,' she said. 'Any afternoon almost.'

By the door he turned, and suddenly the girl,

from the far end of the room, smiled. It was a smile of friendship, of reassurance, and, best of all, of intimacy.

Under the splendour of it he felt the blood rush to his head, his eyes were dimmed, he stumbled down the stairs the happiest creature in London.

The smile accompanied him for the rest of that day, through the night, and into the Duncombe library next morning. That morning was not an easy one for Henry. He arrived with the stern determination to work his very hardest and before the luncheon bell sounded to reduce at least some of the letters to discipline and sobriety. Extraordinary the personal life that those letters seemed to possess ! You would suppose that they did not wish to be made into a book, or at any rate, if that had to be, that they did not wish the compiler of the work to be Henry. They slipped from under his fingers, hid themselves, deprived him of dates just when he most urgently needed them, gave him Christian names when he must have surnames, and were sometimes so old and faded and yellow that it was impossible to make anything out of them at all.

Sir Charles had as yet shown no sign. Of what he was thinking it was impossible to guess. He had not yet given Henry any private letters to write, and the first experiment on the typewriter was still to be made. One day soon he would spring, and with his long nose hanging over the little tattered, disordered piles on Henry's table would peer and finger and examine. Henry knew that that moment was approaching and that he must have something ready, but this morning he *could* not concentrate.

The plunge into life had been too sudden. The girl was with him in the room, standing just a little way from him smiling at him. . . .

And behind her again there were Millie and the Platts, and Peter and the three Graces, and the Romantic Novel and even Mr. King—and behind these again all London with its banging, clattering, booming excitement, the omnibuses running, the flags flying, the Bolshevists with their plots, and the shops with their jewels and flowers, the actors and actresses rehearsing in the theatres, the messenger boys running with messages, the policemen standing with hands outstretched, the newspapers announcing the births and the deaths and the marriages, D' Annunzio in Fiume, the Poles in Warsaw fighting for their lives, the Americans in New York drinking secretly in little back bedrooms, and the sun rising and setting all over the place at an incredible speed.

It was of no use to say that Henry had nothing to do with any of these things. He might have something to do with any one of them at any moment. Stop for an instant to see whether the ground is going to open in Piccadilly Circus and you are lost !—or found !—at any rate, you are taken, neck and crop, and flung into life whether you wish it or no. And Henry did wish it ! He loved this nearness and closeness, this sense of being one both of the audience and the actors at one and the same time ! Meanwhile the letters, with their gentle, slightly scornful evocation of another world, only a little behind this one, and in its own opinion at any rate, infinitely superior to it, were waiting for his concentration.

Then the Duncombe family itself was beginning

to absorb him, with its own dramatic possibilities. At luncheon that day he was made forcibly aware of that drama.

Lady Bell-Hall had from the first stirred his eager sympathies. He was so very sorry for the poor little woman. He did so eagerly wish that he could persuade her to be a little less frightened at the changes that were going on around her. After all, if Duncombe Hall *had* to be sold, and if she *were* forced to live in a little flat and have only one servant, did it matter so terribly? Even though Soviets were set up in London and strange men with red handkerchiefs and long black beards did sit at Westminster, there would still be many delightful things left to enjoy! Her health was good, her appetite quite admirable, and the Young Women's Christian Association and Society for the Comfort of Domestic Servants and the League of Pity for Aged Widowers (some among many of Lady Bell-Hall's interests) would in all probability survive many Revolutions, or at least, even though they changed their names, would turn into something equally useful and desirous of help. He longed to say some of these things to her.

His opportunity suddenly and rather uncomfortably arrived.

Lady Bell-Hall in appearance resembled a pretty little pig—that is, she had the features of a pig, a very young pig before time has enveloped it in fat. And so soft and pink were her cheeks, so round her little arms, of so delicate a white her little nose, so beseechingly grey her eyes that you realised very forcibly how charming and attractive sucklings might easily be. She sat at the end of the round mahogany table in the long dark dining-

room, and talked to her unresponsive brother and sometimes to Henry in a soft gentle voice with a little plaint in it, infinitely touching and pathetic, hoping against hope for the best.

To-day there came to the luncheon an old friend of the family, whose name Henry had once or twice heard, a Mr. Light-Johnson.

Mr. Light-Johnson was a long, thin, cadaverous-looking man with black sleek hair and a voice like a murmuring brook. He paid no attention to Henry and very little to Duncombe, but he sat next to Lady Bell-Hall and leaned towards her and stared into her face with large wondering eyes that seemed always to be brimming with unshed tears.

There are pessimists and pessimists, and it seems to be one of the assured rules of life that however the world may turn, whatever unexpected joys may flash upon the horizon, however many terrible disasters may be averted from mankind, pessimists will remain pessimists to the end. And such a pessimist as this Henry had never before seen.

He had an irritating, tantalising habit of lifting a spoonful of soup to his lips and then putting it down again because of his interest in what he was saying.

'What I feared last Wednesday,' he said, 'has already come true.'

'Oh dear!' said Lady Bell-Hall. 'What is that?'

'The Red Flag is flying in East Croydon. The Workers' Industrial Union have commandeered the Y.M.C.A. reading-room and have issued a manifesto to the Croydon Parish Council.'

'Dear, dear! Dear, dear!' said Lady Bell-Hall.

'It is a melancholy satisfaction,' said Mr. Light-Johnson, 'to think how right one was last Wednesday. I hardly expected that my words would be justified so quickly.'

'And do you think,' said Lady Bell-Hall, 'that the movement—taking Y.M.C.A. reading-rooms I mean—will spread quickly over London?'

'Dear lady,' said Mr. Light-Johnson, 'I can't disguise from you that I fear the worst. It would be foolish to do any other. I have a cousin, Major Merriward, you've heard me speak of him—whose wife is a niece of one of Winston Churchill's secretaries. He told me last night at the Club that Churchill's levity—well, it's scandalous!—Nero fiddling while Rome burns isn't in it at all! I must tell you frankly that I expect complete Bolshevist rule in London within the next three months.'

'Oh dear! oh dear!' said Lady Bell-Hall. 'Do have a little of that turbot, Mr. Johnson. You're eating nothing. I'm only too afraid you're right. The banks will close and we shall all starve.'

'For the upper classes,' said Mr. Johnson, 'the consequences will be truly terrible. In Petrograd to-day Dukes and Duchesses are acting as scavengers in the streets. What else can we expect? I heard from a man in the Club yesterday, whose son was in the Archangel forces, that it is Lenin's intention to move to London and to make it the centre of his world rule. I leave it to you to imagine, Lady Bell-Hall, how safe any of us will be when we are in the power of Chinese and Mongols.'

'Chinese!' cried Lady Bell-Hall. 'Chinese!'

'Undoubtedly. They will police London, or what is left of it, because there will of course be

severe fighting first, and nowadays, with aerial warfare what it is, a few days' conflict will reduce London to a heap of ruins.'

'And what about the country?' asked Lady Bell-Hall. 'I'm sure the villagers at Duncombe are very friendly. And so they ought to be, considering the way that Charles has always treated them.'

'It's from the peasantry that I fear the worst,' said Mr. Light-Johnson. 'After all it has always been so. Think of La Vendée, think of the Russian peasantry in this last Revolution. No, there is small comfort there, I'm afraid.'

Throughout this little conversation Duncombe had kept silent. Now he broke in with a little ironic chuckle; this was the first time that Henry had heard him laugh.

'Just think, Margaret,' he said, 'of Spiders. Spiders is our gardener, Light-Johnson, a stout cheery fellow. He will probably be local executioner.'

Light-Johnson turned and looked at his host with reproachful eyes.

'Many a true word before now has been spoken in jest, Duncombe,' he said. 'You will at any rate not deny that this coming winter is going to be an appalling one—what with strikes, unemployment, and the price of food for ever going up—all this with the most incompetent Government that any country has ever had in the world's history. I don't think that even you, Duncombe, can call the outlook very cheerful.'

'Every Government is the worst that any country's ever had,' said Duncombe. 'However, I daresay you're right, Light-Johnson. Perhaps

this is the end of the world. Who knows? And what does it matter if it is?'

'Really, Charles!' Lady Bell-Hall was eating her cutlet with great rapidity, as though she expected a naked Chinaman to jump in through the window at any moment and snatch it from her. 'But seriously, Mr. Light-Johnson, do you see no hope anywhere?'

'Frankly, none at all. I don't think any one could call me a pessimist. I simply look at things as they are—the true duty of every man.'

'And what do you think one ought to do?'

'For myself,' said Light-Johnson, helping himself to another cutlet, 'I shall spend the coming winter on the Riviera—Mentone, I think. The Income Tax is so scandalous that I shall probably live in the South of France during the next year or two.'

'And so shoulder your responsibilities like a true British citizen,' said Duncombe. 'I'm sure you're right. You're lucky to be able to get away so easily.'

Light-Johnson's sallow cheeks flushed ever so slightly. 'Of course, if I felt that I could do any good I would remain,' he said. 'I'm not the sort of man to desert a sinking ship, I hope. Sinking it is, I fear. The great days of England are over. We must not be sentimentalists nor stick our heads, ostrich-wise, in the sand. We must face facts.'

It was here that Henry made his great interruption, an interruption that was, had he only known it, to change the whole of his future career. He had realised thoroughly at first that it was his place to be seen and not heard. Young secretaries were not expected to talk unless they were definitely

needed to make a party 'go.' But as Light-Johnson had continued his own indignation had grown. His eyes, again and again, in spite of himself, sought Lady Bell-Hall's face. He simply could not bear to see the little lady tortured—for tortured she evidently was. Her little features were all puckered with distress. Her eyes had the wide staring expression of a child seeing a witch for the first time. Every word that Light-Johnson uttered seemed to stab her like a knife. To Henry this was awful.

'They are not facts. They are not facts!' he cried. 'After every war there are years when people are confused. Of course there are. It can't be otherwise. We shall never have Bolshevism here. Russian conditions are different from everywhere else. They are all ignorant in Russia. Millions of ignorant peasants. While prices are high of course people are discontented and say they're going to do dreadful things. When everybody's working again prices will go down and then you'll see how much any one thinks about Russia! England isn't going to the dogs, and it never will!'

The effect of this outburst was astonishing. Light-Johnson turned round and stared at Henry as though he were a small Pom that had hitherto reposed peacefully under the table but had suddenly woken up and bitten his leg. He smiled, his first smile of the day.

'Quite so,' he said indulgently. 'Of course. One can't expect every one to have the same views on these matters.'

But Lady Bell-Hall was astonishing. To Henry's amazement she was angry, indignant. She stared at him as though he had offered a deadly insult.

Why, she wanted to be made miserable! She liked Mr. Johnson's pessimism! She wished to be tortured! She preferred it! She hugged her wound and begged for another turn on the wheel!

'Really, Mr. Trenchard,' she said, 'I don't think you can know very much about it. As Mr. Light-Johnson says, we should face facts.' She ended her sentence with a hint of indulgence as though she would say, 'He's very, very young. We must excuse him on the score of his youth.'

The rest of the meal was most uncomfortable. Light-Johnson would speak no more. Henry was miserable and indignant. He had made a fool of himself, but he was glad that he had spoken! Lady Bell-Hall would hate him always now and would prejudice her brother against him—but he was glad that he had spoken! Nevertheless his cheese choked him, and in embarrassed despair he took a pear that he did not want, and because no one else had fruit ate it in an overwhelming silence.

Then in the library he had his reward. Light-Johnson had departed.

'I shan't want you this afternoon, Trenchard,' Duncombe said. Then he added, 'You spoke up well. That man's an ass.'

'I shouldn't,' he stammered, 'have said anything. I don't know enough. I only——'

'Nonsense. You know more than Light-Johnson. Speak up whenever you have a mind to. It does my sister good.'

And this was the beginning of an alliance between the two.

CHAPTER II

MILLIE AND PETER

And here are some extracts from a Diary that Millicent kept at this time.

April 14. — Just a week since I started with the Platts, and I feel as though I'd been there all my life. And yet I haven't got the thing going at all. I'm in nearly the same mess as I was the first morning. I'm not proud of myself, but at the same time it isn't all my fault. Look at the Interruptions alone ! (I've put a capital because really they are at the heart of all my trouble.) Victoria herself doesn't begin to know what letting any one alone is. I seem at present to have an irresistible fascination for her. She sits and stares at me until I feel as though I were some strange animal expected to change into something stranger.

And she doesn't know what silence means. She says : ' I mustn't interrupt your work, my Millie ' (I do wish she wouldn't call me ' my Millie '), and then begins at once to chatter. All the same one can't help being fond of her—at least at present. I expect I shall get very impatient soon and then she'll be rude and then there'll be a scene and then I shall leave. But she really *is* so helpless and so full of alarms and terrors. Never again will I envy any

one with money! I expect before the War she was quite a happy woman with a small allowance from her father, living in Streatham and giving little tea-parties. Now, what with Income Tax, servants, motor-cars, begging friends, begging enemies, New Art and her sisters, she doesn't know where to turn. Of course Clarice and Ellen are her principal worries. I've really no patience with Clarice. I hate her silly fat face, pink blanc-mange, with its silly fluffy yellow hair. I hate the way she dresses, always too young for her years, and always with bits stuck on to her clothes as though she picked pieces of velvet and lace up from the floor and pinned them in just anywhere.

I hate her silly laugh and her vanity and the way that she will recite a poem about a horse (I think it is called something like 'Lascar') on the smallest opportunity. I suppose I can't bear seeing any one make a fool of herself or himself, and all the people who come to the Platts' house laugh at her. All the same, she's the happiest of the three women; that's because she's more truly conceited than the others. It's funny to see how she prides herself on having learned how to manage Victoria. She's especially sweet to her when she wants anything, and you can see it coming on hours beforehand. Victoria is a fool in many things, but she isn't such a fool as all that. I call Clarice the Ostrich.

Ellen is quite another matter. By far the most interesting of them. I think she would do something remarkable if she'd only break away from the family and get outside it. Part of her unhappiness comes, I'm sure, from her not being able to make up her mind to do this. She despises herself. And she despises everybody else too. Men especially, she

detests men, although she dresses rather like them. Victoria and Clarice are both afraid of her because of the bitter things she says. She glares at the people who come to luncheon and tea as though she would like to call fire down and burn them all. It's amusing to see one of the new artists (I beg their pardon—New Artists) trying to approach her, attempting flattery, and then falling back aware that he has made one enemy in the house at any rate. The funny thing is that she rather likes me, and that is all the stranger because I understand from Brooker, the little doctor, that she always disliked the secretaries. And I haven't been especially sweet to her. Just my ordinary, which Mary says is less than civility. . . .

April 16.—Ephraim Block and his friend Adam P. Quinzey (that isn't his real name but it's something like that) to luncheon. I couldn't help asking him whether he didn't think the 'Eve' rather too large. And didn't he despise me for asking! He told me that when he gets a commission for sculpting in an open space, the tree that goes with the 'Eve' will be large enough to shelter all the school children of Europe.

Although he's absurd I can't help being sorry for him. He is so terribly hungry and eats Victoria's food as though he were never going to see another meal again. Ellen tells me that he's got a woman who lives with him by whom he's had about eight children. Poor little things! And I think Victoria's beginning to get tired of him. She's irritated because he wants her to pay for the tree and the serpent as well as Eve herself. He says it isn't *his* fault that Victoria's house isn't large enough, and *she* says that he hasn't even begun the tree

yet, and when he's finished it it will be time enough to talk. Then there are the Balaclavas (the nearest I can get to their names). She's a Russian dancer, very thin and tall and covered with chains and beads, and he's very fat with a dead white face and long black hair. They talk the strangest broken English, and are very depressed about life in general —as well they may be, poor things. He thinks Pavlova and Karsavina simply aren't in it with her as artists, and I daresay they're not, but one never has a chance of judging because she never gets an engagement anywhere. So meanwhile they eat Victoria's food and try to borrow money of any one in the house who happens to be handy. You can't help liking them, they're so helpless. Of course I know that Block and the Balaclavas and Clarice's friends are all tenth-rate as artists. I've seen enough of Henry's world to see that. They are simply plundering Victoria, as Brooker says, but I'm rather glad all the same that for a time at any rate they've found a place with food in it.

I shan't be glad soon. I'm beginning to realise in myself a growing, quite insane desire to get this house straight—insane because I don't even see how to begin. And Victoria's very difficult ! She loves Power, and if you suggest anything and she thinks you're getting too authoritative she at once vetoes it whatever it may be. On the other hand she's truly warm-hearted and kind. If I can keep my temper and stay on perhaps I shall manage it. . . .

April 17.—I've had thorough ' glooms ' to-day. I'm writing this in bed, whither I went as early as nine o'clock, Mary being out at a party and the sitting-room looking grizzly. I feel better already. But a visit to mother always sends me into the depths.

It is terrible to me to see her lying there like a dead woman, staring in front of her, unable to speak, unable to move. Extraordinary woman that she is ! Even now she won't see Katherine, although Katherine tries again and again.

And I think that she hates me too. That nurse (whom I can't abide) has tremendous power over her. I detest the house now. It's so gloomy and still and corpse-like. When you think of all the people it used to have in it—so many that nobody would believe it when we told them. What fun we used to have at Christmas time and on birthdays, and down at Garth too. Philip finished all that—not that he meant to, poor dear.

After seeing mother I had tea with father down in the study. He's jolly when I'm there, but honestly, I think he forgets my very existence when I'm not. He never asked a single question about Henry. Just goes from his study to his club and back again. He says that his book *Hazlitt and His Contemporaries* is coming out in the autumn. I wonder who cares ?

It makes one very lonely if one thinks about it. Of course there's dear Henry—and after him Katherine and Mary. But Henry's got this young woman he picked up in Piccadilly Circus, and Katherine's got her babies, and Mary her medicine. And I've got the Platts, I suppose. . . .

All the same sometimes it isn't much fun being a modern girl. I daresay liberty and going about like a man's a fine thing, but sometimes I'd like to have some one pet me and make a fuss of me and care whether I'm alive or not.

On the impulse of this mood, I've asked Peter Westcott to come and have tea with me. He seems

lonely too, and was really nice at Henry's the other day. Now I shall go to sleep and dream about Victoria's correspondence.

April 18.—A young man to luncheon to-day very different from the others. Humphrey Baxter by name ; none of the aesthete about *him* ! Clean, straight-back, decently dressed, cheerful young man. Item, dark with large brown eyes. At first it puzzled me as to how he got into this crowd at all, then I discovered that he's rehearsing in a play that Clarice is getting up, *The Importance of Being Earnest.* He plays Bunbury or has something to do with a man called Bunbury—anyway they all call him Bunny. He's vastly amused by the aesthetes and laughs at them all the time; the odd thing is that they don't mind. He also knows exactly how to treat Victoria, taking her troubles seriously, although his eyes twinkle, and being really very courteous to her.

The only one of the family who hates him is Ellen. She can't abide him, and told him so to-day when he challenged her. He asked her why she hated him. She said, ' You're useless, vain, and empty-headed.' He said, ' Vain and empty-headed I may be, but useless no. I oil the wheels.' She said hers didn't need oiling, and he said that if ever they did need it she was to send for him. This little sparring match was very light-hearted on his side, deadly earnest on hers. The only other person who isn't sure of him is Brooker—I don't know why.

Of course *I* like him—Bunny I mean. What it is to have some one gay and sensible in this household ! He likes me too. Ellen says he goes after every girl he sees.

I don't care if he does. I can look after myself. *She's* a queer one. She's always looking at me as though she wanted to speak to me. And yesterday a strange thing happened. I was going upstairs and she was going down. We met at the corner and she suddenly bent forward and kissed me on the cheek. Then she ran on upstairs as though the police were after her. I don't very much like being kissed by other women I must confess; however, if it gives her pleasure, poor thing, I'm glad. She's so unhappy and so cross with herself and every one else.

April 20.—Bunny comes every day now. He says he wants to tell me about his life—a very interesting one he says. He complains that he never finds me alone. I tell him I have my work to do.

April 21.—Bunny wants me to act in Clarice's play. I said I wouldn't for a million pounds. Clarice is furious with me and says I'm flirting with him.

April 22.—Bunny and I are going to a matinee of *Chu Chin Chow*. He says he's been forty-four times and I haven't been once. He likes to talk to me about his mother. He wants me to meet her.

April 24.—Clarice won't speak to me. I don't care. Why shouldn't I have a little fun? And Bunny is a good sort. He certainly isn't very clever, but he says his strong line is motor-cars, about which I know nothing. After all, if some one's clever in one thing that's enough. I'm not clever in anything. . . .

April 25.—Sunday, I went over to luncheon to see whether I could do anything for Victoria and had an extraordinary conversation with Ellen. She

insisted on my going up to her bedroom with her after luncheon. A miserable-looking room, with one large photograph over the bed of a girl, rather pretty — Mary Pickford prettiness — and nothing else at all.

She began at once, a tremendous tirade, striding about the room, her hands behind her back. Words poured forth like bath-water out of a pipe. She said that I hated her and that every one hated her. That she had always been hated and she didn't care, but liked it. That she hoped that more people would hate her ; that it was an honour to be hated by most people. But that she didn't want *me* to hate her, and that she couldn't think why I did. Unless of course I'd listened to what other people said of her—that I'd probably done that, as every one did it. But she had hoped that I was wiser. *And* kinder. *And* more generous. . . . Here she paused for breath, and I was able to get in a word saying that I didn't hate her, that nobody had said anything against her, that in fact I liked her—— Oh no, I didn't, Ellen burst in. No, *no*, I didn't. Any one could see that. I was the only person she'd ever wanted to like her, and she wasn't allowed to have even that. I assured her that I did like her and considered her my friend and that we'd always be friends. Upon that she burst into tears, looking too strange, sitting in an old rocking-chair and rocking herself up and down. I can't bear to see any one cry ; it doesn't stir my pity as it ought to do. It only makes me irritated. So I just sat on her bed and waited. At last she stopped, and sniffing a good deal got up and came over. She sat down on the bed and suddenly put her arms round me and stroked my hair. I *can't* bear to have

my hair stroked by anybody—or at least by almost anybody. However, I sat there and let her do it, because she seemed so terribly unhappy.

I suppose she felt I wasn't very responsive, because suddenly she got up very coldly and with great haughtiness as though she were a queen dismissing an audience. 'Well, now you'd better go. I've made a sufficient fool of myself for one day.' So I got up too and laughed because it seemed the easiest thing, and said that I was her friend and always would be and would help her any way I could, but that I wasn't very sentimental and couldn't help it if I wasn't. And she said still very haughtily that I didn't understand her, but that that wasn't very strange because after all no one else did, and would I go because she had a headache and wanted to lie down. So I went.

Wasn't I glad after this to find Bunny downstairs. He suggested a walk, and as Victoria was sleeping off the Sunday beef upstairs I agreed, and we went along all through the Park and up to the Marble Arch, and the sun was so bright that it made the sheep look blue and the buds were waxy and there were lots of dogs and housemaids being happy with soldiers and babies in prams and all the atheists and Bolsheviks as cheery as anything on their tubs. Bunny really is a darling. He sees all the funny things, just as I do; I don't believe a word that Ellen says about him. He assures me that he's only loved one girl in his life, and that he gave her up because she said that she wouldn't have babies. He was quite right, I think. He says that he's just falling in love again with some one else now. Of course he may mean me, and he certainly looked as though he did. I don't care. I want to

be happy and people to like me and every one to love everybody. Why shouldn't they ? Not uncomfortably, making scenes like Ellen, but just happily with a sense of humour and not expecting miracles. I said this to Bunny, and he agreed.

We had tea at a café in Oxford Street. He wanted to take me to a Cinema after that, but I wouldn't. I went home and read *Lord Jim* until Mary came in. That's the book Henry used to be crazy about. I think Bunny is rather like Jim, although, of course, Bunny isn't a coward. . . .

Now Millie was seized with a strange and unaccountable happiness—unaccountable to her because she did not try to account for it. Simply everything was lovely—the weather, the shops, the people in the streets, Mary, Henry, the Platts (although Clarice pouted at her and Ellen was sulky). Everything was lovely. She danced, she sang, she laughed. Nothing and nobody could offend her. . . .

In the middle of this happiness Peter Westcott came to tea. She had asked him because she was sorry for him, and because she felt that she had not been quite fair to him in the past. Nevertheless as she waited for him in her little sitting-room there was a little patronage and contempt for him still in her heart. She had always thought of him as old and gloomy and solemn. He seemed to her to be that to-day as he came in, stayed awkwardly for a moment by the door, and then came forward with heavy, rather lumbering steps towards her. But his hand was warm and strong—a clean good grip that she liked. He sat down, making her wicker chair creak—then there was an untidy pause.

She gave him his tea and something to eat and talked about the weather.

At another time, it might be, the ice would never have been broken and he would have gone away, leaving them no closer than they had been before. But to-day her happiness was too much for her ; she could not see him without wanting to make him laugh.

'Have you seen Henry ?' she asked. It was so difficult to speak much about Henry without smiling.

'Not for a week,' he answered ; 'he's very busy with his Baronet and his strange young woman.' Then he smiled. He looked straight across at her, into her eyes.

'Why did you ask me to come to tea ?'

'Why ?'

'Yes, because you don't like me. You think me a tiresome middle-aged bore and a bad influence for Henry.' His eyes drew her own. Suddenly she liked his face, his clear honest gaze, his strong mouth and something there that spoke unmistakably of loyalty and courage.

'Well, I didn't like you,' she said after a moment's pause. 'That's quite true. I liked you for the first time at Henry's the other day. You see, I've had no chance of knowing you, have I ? And I decided that we ought to know one another —because of Henry.'

'Do you really want to know me better ?' he asked.

'Yes, I really want to,' she answered.

'Well, then, I must tell you something—something about myself. I never speak about the past to anybody. Of what importance can it be to

anybody but myself? But if we are going to be friends you ought to know something of it—and I'm going to tell you.'

She saw that he had, before he came, made up his mind as to exactly the things that he would tell her, that without realising it he intended it as an honour that he should want to tell her. Then, too, her feminine curiosity stirred in her. Henry had told her a little, a very little, about him; she knew that he had had a bad time, that he was married, but that his wife had been seen by no one for many years, that he had written some books now forgotten, that he had done well in the War—and that was all.

'Tell me everything you like,' she said. 'I'm proud that you should want to.'

'I was born,' Peter began, 'in a little town called Treliss on the borders of Cornwall and Glebeshire in '84. I had a very rotten childhood. I won't bore you with all that, but my mother was frightened into her grave by my father, who hated me and everybody else. He sent me to a bad school, and at last I ran away up to London. I had one friend, a Treliss fisherman, who was the best human being I've ever known, and he came up to London with me. Things went from bad to worse the first years, but looking back on it I can only see everything that happened in the most ridiculously romantic light—absurd things that I'd like to tell you more about in detail some time. They were *so* absurd; you simply wouldn't believe me if I told you. I was mixed up, for instance, with melodramatic theatrical anarchists who tried to blow up poor old Victoria when she was out driving. Looking back now I can't be sure that those things ever really happened at all.

'I never seem to meet such people now or to see such things. Was it only my youth perhaps that made me fancy it all like that? You and Henry, may be, are imagining things in just that way now. Stephen, for instance, my fisherman friend. I've never met any one like him since—so good, so simple, so direct, so childlike. I knew magnificent men in the War as direct and simple as Stephen, but they didn't affect me in the way he did—that may have been my youth again.

'Whatever it was we went lower and lower. We couldn't get any work and we were just about starving, when I got ill, so ill that I should have died if the luck hadn't suddenly turned, an old school friend of mine appeared and carried me off to his home. Yes, luck turned with a vengeance then. I had written a story and it was published and it had a little success. One thinks, you know, that that little success is a very big one the first time it comes—that every one is talking about one and reading one when really it is a few thousand people at the most.

'Anyway that first success put me on my feet. It was during those years after the Boer War when I think literary success was easier to get than it is now—more attention was paid to writing because the world was quieter and had leisure to think about the arts and money to pay for them. I don't mean that genius, real genius, wouldn't find it just as easy now as then to come along and establish itself, but I wasn't a genius, of course, nor anything like one. Well, I had friends and a home and work, and everything should have been well, but I always felt that something was working against me, some bad influence, some ill omen—I've felt

it all my life, I feel it now, I shall feel it till I die. Lucky, healthy people can laugh at those things, but when you feel them you don't laugh. You know better. Then I married—the daughter of people who lived near by in Chelsea ; I was terribly in love ; although I felt there was something working against us, yet I couldn't see how now it could touch us. I was sure that she loved me—I knew that I loved her. She was such a child that I thought I could guide her and form her and make her what I wanted. From the first there was something wrong ; I can see that now, looking back. She had been spoilt because she was an only child and had a stupid silly mother, and she was afraid of everything—of being ill, of being hurt, of being poor. She was conventional too, and only liked the people from the class she knew, people who did all the same things, spoke the same way, ate the same way, dressed the same way. I remember that some of my Glebeshire friends came to see me one day and frightened her out of her life. Poor Clare ! I should understand her now, I think, but I don't know. One has things put into one and things left out of one before one's born and you *can't* alter them, you can only restrain them, keep them in check. I had something fundamentally wild in me, she something tame in her. If we had both been older and wiser we might have compromised, as all married people have to, I suppose, but we were both so young that we expected perfection, nay, we demanded it. Perfection ! Lord, what youth ! . . . Then a baby was born, a boy—I let myself go over that boy ! . . .' Peter paused. . . . 'I can't talk much about that even now. He died. Then everything went

wrong. Clare said she'd never have another child. And she was tired of me and frightened of me too. I can see now that she had much justice there. I must have been a dull dog after the boy died, and when I'm dull I *am* dull. I get so easily convinced that I'm meant to fail, that I've no right in the world at all. Clare wanted fun and gaiety.

'We hadn't the means for it anyway. I was writing badly. I couldn't keep my work clear of my troubles ; I couldn't get right at it as one must if one's going to get it on to paper with any conviction. My books failed one after another and with justice.

'People spoke of me as a failure, and that Clare couldn't endure. She hadn't ever cared very much for my writing, only for the success that it brought. Well, you can see the likely end of it all. She ran off to Paris with my best friend, a man who'd been at school with me, whom I'd worshipped.'

'Oh,' Millie said, 'I'm sorry.'

'I only got what I deserved. Another man would have managed Clare all right—made a success out of the whole thing. There's something in me —a kind of blindness or obstinacy or pride—that sends people away from me. You know it yourself. You recognised it in me from the first. Henry didn't, simply because he's so ingenuous and so warm-hearted. He forgets himself entirely ; you and I think of ourselves a good deal. I went back to Treliss. I had a friend there, a woman, who showed me a little how things were. I wanted to give everything up and just booze my time away and sink into a worthless loafer as my father had done. She prevented me, and I had, too, a strange

revelation one night out on the hills beyond Treliss when I saw things clearly for an hour or two.

'I determined to come back and fight it out. I could show pluck even though I couldn't show anything else. Now I can see that there was something false in that, as there was in so many of the crises of my life, because I was thinking only of myself, seeing myself set up against all the world and the devil and all the furies, making a fine figure while the armies of God stood by admiring and whispering one to another, "He's a fine fighter —there's something in that fellow."

'It was in just that mood that I came back to London. I went over to Paris and searched for Clare, couldn't hear anything of her, then came back and buried myself.

'I was full of this idea of courage, my back to the wall and fighting the universe. So I just shut myself up, got a little journalism—sporting journalism it was, football matches and boxing and cricket —and grouched along. The other men on the sporting paper thought me too conceited for words and left me alone. I drank a bit too, the worst kind of drinking, alone in one's room.

'Then the War came, thank God. I won't bother you with that, but it kept me occupied until the Armistice, then suddenly I was flung back again with all my old troubles thick upon me once more. I remember one day I had been seeing a rich successful novelist. He talked to me about his successes until I was sick. Then in the evening I went and saw the other end of the business, the young unpopular geniuses who are going to change the world. Both seemed to me equally futile, and once again I was tempted to end it all and just let

myself go when I suddenly, standing there in Piccadilly Circus, saw myself just as I had years before at Treliss, and my pretentiousness and lack of humour and proportion. And I saw how small we were, and what children, and how short life was, and then and there I swore I'd never take myself so seriously again as to talk about "going to the dogs," or "fighting fate," or "being a success," or "destiny being against me." I cheered up a lot after that. That was my second turning-point. You and Henry have made the third.'

'Me and Henry?' said Millie, regardless of grammar.

'That's why I've burdened you with this lengthy discourse. I haven't spoken of myself for years to a soul. But I want your friendship. I want it terribly, and I'll tell you why.

'You and Henry are young. I see now that it's only the young who matter any more. If you take the present state of the world from the point of view of the middle-aged or the old, it's all utterly hopeless. We may as well make a bonfire of London and go up in the sparks. There's nothing to be said. It's as bad as it can be. There simply isn't time for even the young middle-aged to set things right. But for the young, for every one under thirty it's grand. There's a new city to be built, all the pieces of the old one lying around to teach you lessons—the greatest time to be born into in the world's history.

'And what the middle-aged and old have to do is to feed the young, to encourage them, laugh at them, give them health and strength and brains, such as they are, to stiffen them, to be patient with them, and for them not to lie down and let the

young trample, but to work with them, behind them, around them—above all, to love them, to clear the ground for them, to sympathise and understand them, and to tell them, if they shouldn't see it, that they have such a chance, such an opportunity, as has never before been given to the sons of man.

'For myself what is there? The world that was mine is gone, burnt up, destroyed. But for you, for you and Henry and the great company with you. Golly! What a time!'

He mopped his brow. He looked at Millie and laughed.

'Please forgive me,' he said. 'I haven't let myself go like this for years!'

Millie's sympathy was, for the moment, stronger than her vocabulary—her sympathy, that is, for the earlier part of his declaration. As he recounted to her his own story she had been readily, eagerly carried away, feeling the absolute truth of everything that he said, responding to all his trouble and his loneliness. When he had spoken of his boy she had almost loved him, the maternal in her coming out so that she longed to put her arms round him and comfort him. He seemed, as every man seems to every woman, at such a time himself a child younger than she, more helpless than any woman. But at the end he had swung her on to another mood. She did not know that she liked being addressed as The Young. She felt in this, as she had always before felt with him, that there was something a little priggish, a little laughable in his earnestness. She did not see herself in any group with thousands of other young men and young women. She was not sure that she felt

young at all—and in any case she was simply Millicent Trenchard, with Millicent Trenchard's body, ambitions, and purposes. She had also instinctively the Trenchard distrust of all naked emotions nakedly displayed. This she was happily to conquer—but not yet.

She felt finally as though she were a specimen in a glass jar, set up on the laboratory table, and that the professor was beginning:

'You will now notice that we have an excellent specimen of The Young. . . .'

Then she looked at him and saw how deeply in earnest he was, and that he himself was feeling true British embarrassment at his unforeseen demonstration. This called forth her maternal emotions again. He was a dear old thing—a little childish, a little old and odd, but he needed her help and her sympathy.

'I'll tell you,' she said, 'I don't think it's very much good putting us all into lumps like that. For instance, you couldn't place Mary Cass and myself in the same division, however hard you tried. If you are going simply by years, then that's absurd, because Mary is years older than I am in some things and years younger in others. One's just as old as one feels,' she added with deep profundity, as though she were stating something quite new and fresh that had never been said before.

He smiled, looking at her with great affection.

'I don't want you to look upon yourself as anything in particular,' he said. 'Heaven forbid. That would be much too self-conscious. What I said was from my point of view—the point of view of those who were young before the War—really young, with all their lives and their ambitions

before them—and can never be young again in quite that way. I only wanted to show you that knowing you and Henry has given me a new reason for living and for enjoying life, and a better reason than I've ever had before. I know you distrusted me, and I want you to get over that distrust.'

'If that's what you want,' Millie cried, jumping up and smiling, 'you can have it. I feel you're a real friend, both to Henry and me, and we *want* a friend. Of course we're young and just beginning. We shall make all kinds of mistakes, I expect, and I'd rather you told us about them than any one else.'

'Would you really?' He flushed slowly with pleasure. 'And will you tell me about mine too? Is that a bargain?'

'Well, I don't know about telling you of yours,' she answered. 'I've noticed that that's a very dangerous thing. People ask you to tell them and say they can stand anything, and then when the moment comes they are hurt for evermore. Nor do they believe that those *are* their mistakes—anything else but not those. However, we'll try. Here's my hand on it.'

He took her hand. She was so beautiful, with her colour a little heightened by the excitement and amusement of their talk, her slim straight figure, the honesty and nobility of her eyes as they rested on his face, that in spite of himself his hand trembled in hers. She felt that, and was herself suddenly confused. She withdrew her hand abruptly, and at that moment, to her relief, Mary Cass came in.

She introduced them and they stood talking for a little, talking about anything, hospitals, Ireland, the weather. Then he went away.

'Who's that?' said Mary when he was gone.

'A man called Westcott, a friend of Henry's.'

'I like him. What's he do?'

'He's a writer——'

'Oh, Lord!' Mary threw herself into a chair. 'What a pity. He looks as though he were better than that.'

'He's a dear old thing,' said Millie. 'Just a hundred and fifty years old.'

'Which means,' said Mary, 'that he's been telling you how young you are.'

'Aren't you clever?' said Millie admiringly.

'Whether I'm clever or no,' said Mary, 'I'm tired. This chemistry——'

And with that we leave them.

CHAPTER III

THE LETTERS

Henry was not such a fool as he looked. You, gentle reader, have certainly by now remarked that you cannot believe that all those years in the Army would have failed to make him a trifle smarter and neater and better disciplined than he appears to be. To which I would reply, having learnt the fact through very bitter personal experience, that it is one of the most astonishing facts in life that you do not change with anything like the ease that you ought to.

That is of course only half the truth, but half the truth it is, and if smuts choose your nose to settle on when you're in your cradle, the probability is that they'll still be settling there when you're in your second childhood.

Henry *was* changing underneath, as will very shortly, I hope, be made plain, but the hard ugly truth that I am now compelled to declare is that by the early days of June he had got his Baronet's letters into such a devil of a mess that he did not know where he was nor how he was ever going to get straight again. Nevertheless, I must repeat once more—he was not such a fool as he looked.

During all these weeks his lord and master had not glanced at them once.

He had indeed paid very little attention to Henry, giving him no typewriting, and only occasionally dictating to him very slowly a letter or two. He had been away in the country once for a week and had not taken Henry with him.

He had attempted no further personal advances, had been always kindly but nevertheless aloof. Henry had, on his side, made very few fresh discoveries.

He had met once or twice a brother, Tom Duncombe, a large, fat, red-faced man with a loud laugh, carroty hair, a smell of whisky, and a handsome appetite. Friends had come to luncheon and Mr. Light-Johnson had been as constant and pessimistic as ever, but Henry had not trusted himself to a second outburst. Of his own private love-affair there is more to be said, but of that presently.

The salient fact in the situation was that until now Duncombe had not mentioned the letters, had not looked at them, had not apparently considered them. Every morning Henry, with beating heart, expected those dread words : ' Well now, let's see what you've done '—and every day passed without those words being said.

Every night in his bed in Panton Street he told himself that to-morrow he would force some order into the horrible things, and every day he was once again defeated by them. He was now quite certain that they led a life of their own, that they deliberately skipped, when he was not looking, out of one pile into another, that they changed the dates on their pages and counterfeited handwritings, and were altogether taunting him and teasing him to

the full strength of their yellow crooked little souls. And yet behind the physical exterior of these letters he knew that he was gaining a feeling for and a knowledge of the period with which they dealt that was invaluable. He had burrowed in the library and discovered a host of interesting details—books like Hogg's *Reminiscences* and Gibson's *Recollections*, and Washington Irving's *Abbotsford* and Lang's *Lockhart*, and the Ballantyne *Protests* and the *Life of Archibald Constable* — them and many many others—he had devoured with the greed of a shipwrecked mariner on a desert island. He could tell you everything now about the Edinburgh of that day—the streets, the fashions, the clothes, the politics. It seemed that he must, in an earlier incarnation, have lived there with them all, possibly, he liked to fancy, as a second-hand bookseller hidden somewhere in the intricacies of the Old Town. He seemed to feel yet beating through his arteries the thrill and happy pride when Sir Walter himself with his cheery laugh, his joke and his kindly grip of the hand, stood among the dusky overhanging shelves and gossiped and yarned and climbed the rickety ladder searching for some ballad or romance, while Henry, his eyes aflame with hero-worship, held that same ladder and gazed upwards to that broad-shouldered form.

Yes—but the letters were in the devil of a mess !

And then suddenly the blow fell. One beautiful June morning, when the sun, refusing to be beaten by the thick glare of the windows, was transforming the old books and sending mists of gold and purple from ceiling to floor, Henry, his head bent over files of the recalcitrant letters, heard

the very words that for weeks he had been expecting.

'Now then—it's about time I had a look at those letters of yours.'

It is no exaggeration at all to say that young Henry's heart stood absolutely still, his feet were suddenly like dead fish in his boots, and his hands weak as water. This, then, was The End! Oh, how he wished that it had occurred weeks ago! He had by now become devotedly attached to the library, loved the books like friends, was happier when hidden in the depths of the little gallery nosing after Bage and Maturin and Clara Reeve than he had been in all his life before. Moreover, he realised in this agonising moment how deeply attached he had grown during these weeks to his angular master. Few though the words between them had been, there seemed to him to have developed mysteriously and subterraneously as it were an unusual sympathy and warmth of feeling. That may have been simply his affectionate nature and innocence of soul. Nevertheless, there it was. He made a last frantic effort towards a last discipline, juggling the letters together and trying to put the more plainly dated next to one another on the top of the little untidy heaps.

He realised that there was nothing to be done. He sat there waiting for sentence to be pronounced.

Duncombe came over to the table and rested one hand on Henry's shoulder.

'Now, let's see,' he said. 'You've had more than a month—I expect to find great progress. How many boxes have you done?'

'I'm still at the first,' said Henry, his voice low and gentle.

'Still at the first? Ah, well, I expect there are more than one knew. What's your system? First in months and then in years, I suppose?'

'The trouble is,' said Henry, the words choking in his throat, 'that so many of them aren't dated at all.'

'Yes—that would be so. Well, here we have April 1816. What I should do, I think, is to make them into six-monthly packets—otherwise the—Hullo, here's 1818!'

'They move about so,' said Henry feebly.

'Move about? Nobody can move them if you don't— March 7, 1818; March 12, 1818; April 3— Why, here we are back in '16 again!'

There followed then the most dreadful pause. It seemed to the agonised Henry to last positively for centuries. He grew an old old man with a long, white, sweeping beard, he looked back over a vast misspent lifetime, his hearing was gone, his vision was dulled, he was tired, deadly tired, and longed only for the gentle peace of the kindly grave. Not a word was said. Duncombe's long white fingers moved with a deadly and practised skill from packet to packet, taking up one, looking at it, laying it down again, taking up another, holding it for an eternity in his hand then carefully replacing it. The clock wheezed and gurgled and chattered, the sunlight danced on the bookshelves, Henry was in his grave, dead, buried, a vague pathetic memory to those who once had loved him.

'Why!' a voice came from vast distances; 'these letters aren't arranged at all!' The worst was over, the doom had fallen; nothing more terrible could occur.

Henry said nothing.

'They simply aren't arranged at all!' came the voice more sharply.

Still Henry said nothing.

Duncombe moved back into the room. Henry felt his eyes burrowing into a hole, red-hot, in the middle of his back. He did not move.

'Would you mind telling me what you have been doing all these weeks?'

Henry turned round. The terrible thing was that tears were not far away. He was twenty-six years of age, he had fought in the Great War and been wounded, he had written ten chapters of a romantic novel, he was living a life of independent ease as a bachelor gentleman in Panton Street—nevertheless tears were not far away.

'I warned you,' he said. 'I told you at the very beginning that I was a perfect fool. You can't say I didn't warn you. I've meant to do my very best. I've never before wanted to do my best so badly—I mean so well—I mean—' he broke off. 'I've tried,' he ended.

'But would you mind telling me *what* you've tried?' asked Duncombe. 'The state the letters were in when they were in this box was beautiful order compared with the state they're in now! Why, you've had six weeks at them! What *have* you been doing?'

'I think they move in the night,' said Henry, tears bubbling in his voice, do what he could to prevent them. 'I know that must sound silly to you, or to any sensible person, but I swear to you that I've had dozens of them in the right order when I've gone away one day and found them in every kind of mess when I've got back next morning.'

Duncombe said nothing.

'Then,' Henry went on, gathering a stronger control of himself, 'they really are confusing. Any one would find them so. The writing's often so faded and the signatures sometimes so illegible. And at first—when I started—I knew so little about the period. I didn't know who any of the people were. I've been reading a lot lately and although it looks so hopeless, I——' Then he broke off. 'But it's no good,' he muttered, turning his back. 'I haven't got a well-ordered mind. I never could do mathematics at school. I ought to have told you; the second day I tried to tell you, but I've liked it so, I've enjoyed it. I——'

'I daresay you have enjoyed it,' said Duncombe. 'I can well believe it. You must have had the happiest six weeks of your life. Isn't it aggravating? Here are six weeks entirely wasted.'

'Please take back your money and let me go,' said Henry. 'I can't pay you everything at once because, to tell you the truth, I've spent it, but if you'll wait a little——'

'Money!' cried Duncombe wrathfully. 'Who's talking of money? It's the wasted time I mind. We're not an inch farther on.'

'We are,' cried Henry excitedly. 'I've been taking notes—lots of them. I've got them in a book here. And whoever goes on with this next can have them. He'll learn a lot from them, he will really."

'Let's see your notes,' said Duncombe.

Henry produced a red-bound exercise-book. It was nearly filled with his childish and sprawling hand. There were also many blots, and even some farcical drawings in the margin.

Duncombe took the book and went back with

it to his desk. There followed a lengthy pause, while Henry stood in front of his table staring at the window.

At last Duncombe said, 'You certainly seem to have scribbled a lot here. Yes . . . I take back what I said about your being idle. I'm glad you're not that. And you seem interested; you must be interested to have done all this.'

'I am interested,' said Henry.

'Well, then, I don't understand it. If you are interested, why couldn't you get something more out of the letters? A child of eight could have done them better than you have.'

'It's the kind of brain I have,' said Henry. 'It's always been the same. I never could do examinations. I have an untidy brain. I could always remember things about books but never anything else. It was just the same in the War. I always gave the wrong orders to the men. I never remembered what I ought to say. But when they put me into Intelligence and I could use my imagination a little, I wasn't so bad. I can see Scott and Hogg and the others moving about, and I can see Edinburgh and the way the shops go and everything, but I *can't* do the mechanical part. I *knew* I couldn't at the very beginning.'

'You'd better go on working for a bit while I think about it,' said Duncombe.

Henry went back to the letters, a sick heavy weight of disappointment in his heart. He could have no doubt concerning the final judgement. How could it be otherwise? Well, at the most he had had a beautiful six weeks. He had learnt some very interesting things that he would never forget and that he could not have learnt in any

other way. But how disappointing to lose his first job so quickly! How sad Millie would be and how sarcastic his father! And then the girl! How could he now entertain any hopes of doing anything for her when he had no job, no money, no prospects! . . .

A huge fat tear welled into his eye; he tried to gulp it back; he was too late. It plopped down on to one of the letters. Another followed it. He sniffed and sniffed again. He took out his handkerchief and blew his nose. He fought for self-control and, after a hard sharp battle, gained the victory. The other tears were defeated and reluctantly went back to the place whence they had come.

The clock struck one; in five minutes' time the gong would sound for luncheon. He heard Duncombe get up, cross the floor; once again he felt his hand on his shoulder.

'You certainly have shown imagination here,' he said. 'There are some remarkable things in this book. Not all of it authentic, I fancy.' The hand pressed into his shoulder with a kindly emphasis. 'It's a pity that order isn't your strong point. Never mind. We must make the best of it. We'll get one of those dried-up young clerks at so much an hour to do this part of it. You shall do the rest. I think you'll make rather a remarkable book of it.'

'You're going to keep me?' Henry gulped.

'I'm going to keep you.' Duncombe moved back to his desk. 'Now it's luncheon-time. I suggest that you wash your hands—*and* your face.'

Henry stood for a moment irresolute.

'I don't know what to say—I—to thank——'

'Well, don't,' said Duncombe. 'I hate being thanked. Besides, there's no call for it.'

The gong sounded.

This was an adventurous day for Henry; he discovered in the first place that Duncombe would not himself be in to luncheon, and he descended the cold stone stairs with the anticipatory shiver that he always felt when his master deserted him. Lady Bell-Hall neither liked nor trusted him, and showed her disapproval by showering little glances upon him, with looks of the kind that anxious hostesses bestow upon nervous parlour-maids when the potatoes are going the wrong way round or the sherry has been forgotten. Henry knew what these glances said. They said: 'Oh, young man, I cannot conceive why my brother has chosen you for his secretary. You are entirely unsuited for a secretary. You are rash, ignorant, bad-mannered and impetuous. If there is one thing in life that I detest it is having some one near me whose words and actions are for ever uncertain and not to be calculated beforehand. I am never certain of you from one minute to another. I do wish you would go away and take a post elsewhere.'

Because Henry knew that Lady Bell-Hall was thinking this of him he was always in her presence twice as awkward as he need have been, spilt his soup, crumbled his bread, and made strange sudden noises that were by himself entirely unexpected. To-day, however, he was spared his worst trouble, Mr. Light-Johnson. The only guests were Tom Duncombe and a certain Lady Alicia Penrose, who exercised over Lady Bell-Hall exactly the fascinated influence that a boa-constrictor has for a rabbit.

Alicia Penrose certainly resembled a boa-constrictor, being tall, swollen, and writhing, bound, moreover, so tightly about with brilliant clothing fitting her like a sheath that it was always a miracle to Henry that she could move at all. She must have been a lady of some fifty summers, but her skirts were very short, coming only just below her knees. She was a jolly and hearty woman, living entirely for bridge and food, and not pretending to do otherwise. Henry could not understand why she should come so often to luncheon as she did. He supposed that she enjoyed startling Lady Bell-Hall with peeps into her pleasure-loving life, not that in her chatter she ever paused to listen to her hostess's terrified little 'Really, Alicia!' or 'You can't mean it, Alicia!' or 'I never heard such a thing—never!'

After a while Henry arrived nearer the truth when he supposed that she came in order to obtain a free meal, being in a state of chronic poverty and living in a small series of attics over a mews.

She was, it seemed, related to every person of importance, and alluded to them all in a series of little nicknames that fell like meteors about the table. 'Podgy,' 'Old Cuddles,' 'Dusty Parker,' 'Fifi Bones,' 'Larry,' 'Bronx,' 'Traddles'—these were her familiar friends. When she was alone with Henry, Duncombe, and his sister she was comparatively quiet, paying eager attention to her food (which was not very good) and sometimes including Henry in the conversation. But the presence of an outsider excited her terribly. She was, outwardly at any rate, as warmly excited about the domestic and political situation as was Lady Bell-Hall, but it did not seem to Henry that it

went very deep. So long as her bridge was uninterfered with everything else might go. She talked in short staccato sentences like a female Mr. Jingle.

To-day she was stirred by Tom Duncombe, not that she did not know him well enough, he being very much more in her set than were either his brother or sister. Henry had not liked Tom Duncombe from the first, and to-day he positively loathed him. This was for a very simple human reason, namely, that he talked as though he, Henry, did not exist, looking over his head, and once, when Henry volunteered a comment on the weather, not answering him at all.

And then when the meal was nearly over Henry most unfortunately fell yet again into Lady Bell-Hall's bad graces.

'Servants,' Lady Alicia was saying. 'Servants. Been in a Registry Office all the morning. For father. He wants a footman and don't want to pay much for him; you know all about father, Tommy.' (The Earl of Water-Somerset was notoriously mean.) Offering sixty—sixty for a footman. Did you hear anything like it? Couldn't hear of a soul. All too damned superior. Saw one or two—never saw such men. All covered with tattoo marks and war-ribbons—extraordinary times we live in. Extraordinary. Puffy Clerk told me yesterday—remarkable thing. Down at the Withers on Sunday. Sunday afternoon. Short of a fourth. Found the second footman played. Had him in. Perfect gentleman. Son of a butcher but had been a Colonel in the War. Broke off to fetch in the tea—then sat down again afterwards. Best of the joke, won twenty quid off Addy Blake and next morning asked to have his wages raised. Said

if he was going to be asked to play bridge with the family must have higher wages. And Addy gave them him.'

Tom Duncombe guffawed. 'Dam funny. Dam funny,' he said.

Lady Bell-Hall shook her head. 'A friend of mine, a Mr. Light-Johnson—I think you've met him here, Alicia—told me the other day that he's got a man now who plays on the piano beautifully and reads Spanish. He says that we shall all be soon either killed in our beds or working for the Bolsheviks. What the servants are coming——'

As the old butler brought in the coffee at this moment she stopped and began hurriedly to talk about Conan Doyle's séances, which seemed to her very peculiar—the pity of it was that we couldn't really tell if it had happened just as he said. 'Of course he's been writing stories for years,' she said. 'He's the author of those detective stories, Alicia—and writing stories for a long time must make one very regardless of the truth.'

Then as the butler had retired they were able to continue. 'I don't know what servants are coming to,' she said. 'They never want to go to church now as they used to.'

It was then that Henry made his plunge, as unfortunate in its impetuosity and tactlessness as had been his earlier one; it was perhaps the red supercilious countenance of Tom Duncombe that drove him forward.

'I'm glad servants are going to have a better time now,' he said, leaning forward and staring at Alicia Penrose as though fascinated by her bright colours. 'I can't think how they endured it in the old days before the War, in those awful attics people

used to put them into, and the bad food they got and having no time off and——'

'Why, you're a regular young Bolshevik!' Alicia Penrose cried, laughing. 'Margaret, Charles got a Bolshevik for a secretary. Who'd have thought it?'

'I'm not a Bolshevik,' said Henry, very red. 'I want everything to be fair for everybody all the way round. The Bolsheviks aren't fair any more than the—than the—other people used to be before the War, but it seems to me——'

'Seen the Bradleys lately, Alicia?' said Tom Duncombe, speaking exactly as though Henry existed less than his sister's dog, Pretty One, a nondescript mongrel asleep in a basket near the window.

'No,' said Alicia. 'But that reminds me. Benjy Bradley owes me five quid off a game a fortnight ago at Addy Blake's. Glad you've reminded me, Thomas. That young man wants watching. Plays badly too—why, in that very game he had four hearts——'

Henry's cup was full. Why, again, had he spoken? *When* would he learn the right words on the right occasion? Why had he painted himself even blacker than before in Lady Bell-Hall's sight?'

He went up to the library hating Tom Duncombe, but hating himself even more.

He sat down at his table determining to put in an hour at such slave-driving over the letters as they had never known in all their little lives. At four o'clock punctually he intended to present himself in Mrs. Jenssen's sitting-room.

When he had been stirring the letters about for

some ten minutes or so, the quiet and peace of the library once again settled beautifully around him. It seemed to enfold him as though it loved him and wished him to know it. Once again the strange hallucination stole into his soul that the past was the present and the present the past, that there was no time nor place, and that only thinking made it so, and that the only reality, the only faith, the only purpose in this life or in any other was love—love of beauty, of character, of truth, love above all of one human being for another. He was touched to an almost emotional softness by Duncombe's action that morning. Touched, too, to the very soul by his own love affair, and touched finally to-day by his feeling that the old books in the library, and the times and the places and the people that they stood for, were stretching out hands to him, trying to make him hear their voices.

'Only love us enough and we shall live. Everything lives by love. Touch us with some of your own enchantment. You are calling us back to life by caring for us. . . .' He stopped, his head up, his pen arrested, listening—as though he did in very truth hear voices coming to him from different parts of the room.

What he did hear, however, was the opening of the library door, and what he beheld was Tom Duncombe's bulky figure standing for a moment hesitating in the doorway. He came forward but did not see Henry immediately. He stood again, listening, one finger to his lip like a school-boy about to steal jam. Henry bent his head over his letters, but watched with one eye. All thoughts of love and tenderness were gone with that entrance. He hated Tom Duncombe, and hated him for

reasons more conclusive than wounded vanity. Duncombe took some further steps and then suddenly saw Henry. He stopped dead, staring, then as Henry did not turn, but stayed with head bent forward, he moved on again still cautiously and with the clumsy hesitating step that was especially his.

He arrived at his brother's table and stopped there. Henry, looking side-ways, could see half Duncombe's heavy body, the red cheek, the thick arm and large, ill-shaped fingers. Those same fingers, he perceived, were taking up letters and papers from the table and putting them down again.

Then, like a sudden blow on the heart, certain words of Sir Charles's spoken some week or two before came back to Henry. 'By the way, Trenchard,' he had said, 'if I'm out and you're ever alone in the library here, I want you to be especially careful to allow no one to touch the papers on my table, nor to permit any one to open a drawer —any one, mind you, not even my brother, unless I've told you first that he may. I leave you in charge—you or old Moffatt (the ancient butler)—and if you are going, and I'm not yet back, lock the library and give the keys to Moffatt.'

He had promised that at the time, feeling rather proud that he should have been charged with so confidential an office. Now the time had come for him to keep his word, and the most difficult crisis of his life was suddenly upon him. There had been difficult moments in the War—Henry alone knew how difficult moments of physical challenge, moments of moral challenge too—but then in that desolate hell-delivered country thousands of others

had been challenged at the same time, and some especial courage seemed to have been given one with the occasion. Here he was alone, and alone in an especially arduous way. He did not know how much authority he really had, he did not know whether Sir Charles had in truth meant all that he had said, he did not know whether Tom Duncombe had not after all some right to be there.

Above all, he was young, very young, for his age, doubtful of himself, fearing that he always struck a silly figure in any crisis that he had to face. On the other hand, he was helped by his real hatred of the red-flushed man at the table, unlike his brother-in-law Philip in that, namely, that he did not want every one to like him, and indeed rather preferred to be hated by the people whom he himself disliked.

Tom Duncombe was now pulling at one of the drawers of the table. Henry stood up, feeling that the whole room was singing about his ears.

'I beg your pardon,' he said, smiling feebly, and knowing that his voice was a ridiculous one. 'But would you mind waiting until Sir Charles comes in? I know he won't be long—he said he'd be back by three.'

Duncombe moved away from the drawer and stared.

'Here,' he said. 'Do you know where my brother keeps the key of this drawer? If so, hand it over.'

'Yes, I do know,' said Henry. (It was sufficiently obvious, as the key was hanging on a string at the far corner of the table.) 'But I'm afraid I can't give it you. Sir Charles told me that no one was to have it while he was away.'

Duncombe took in this piece of intelligence very slowly. He stared at Henry as though he were some curious and noxious kind of animal that had just crawled in from under the window. A purple flush suffused his forehead and nose.

'Good God!' he said. 'The infernal cheek!'

They stood silently staring at one another for a moment, then Duncombe said:

'None of your lip, young man. I don't know who the devil you think you are—anyway hand over the key.'

'No,' said Henry, paling, 'I can't.'

'You can't? What the devil do you mean?'

'Simply I can't. I was told not to—I'm your brother's secretary and have to do what he says—not what you say!'

Henry felt himself growing more happily defiant.

'Do you want to get the damnedest hiding you've ever had in your young life?'

'I don't care what you do.'

'Don't care what I do? Well, you soon will. Are you going to give me that key?' (All this time he was pulling at the drawers with angry jerks, pausing to stare at Henry, then pulling again.)

'No.'

'You're not? You know I can get my brother to kick you out?'

'I don't care. I'm going to do what he said.'

'You bloody young fool, he never said you weren't to let me have it.'

'I may have misunderstood him. If I did, he'll put it right when he comes back.'

'Yes, and a nice story I'll tell him of your damned impertinence. Give me that key.'

'Sorry I can't.'

'I'll break your bloody neck.'

'That won't help you to find the key.' Henry was feeling quite cheerful now.

'Christ! . . . You shall get it for that!'

He made two steps to come round the table to get at Henry and saw the key. At the same instant Henry saw that he saw it. He ran forward to secure it, and in a second they were struggling together like two small boys in a manner unlovely, unscientific, even ludicrous. Ludicrous—had there been an observer, but for the fighters themselves it was one of those uncomfortable struggles when there are no rules of the game and anything may happen at any moment. Duncombe was large but fat and in the worst possible condition, with a luncheon still unsettled and in a roving state. Moreover he had never been a fighter. Henry was not a fighter either, and was handicapped at once because at the first onset his pince-nez were knocked on to the carpet. He fought then blindly in a blind world. He knew that Duncombe was kicking, and struggling to strike at him with his fists. Himself seemed strangely involved in Duncombe's chest, at which he tore with his hands, while he bent his head to avoid the blows. He was breathing desperately, while there was such anger seething in his breast as he had never felt for anything human or inhuman in all his life. He felt Duncombe's waistcoat tear, plunged at the shirt, and at once his fingers felt the bare flesh, the soft fat of Duncombe's well-tended body. He was also conscious that he was muttering 'You beast, you beast, you beast!' that his left leg was aching terribly, and that Duncombe had his hand now

firmly fixed in his hair and was pulling with all his strength.

Henry was going. . . . He was being pushed backwards. He caught a large fold of Duncombe's fat between his fingers and pinched. Then he was conscious that in another moment he would be over; he was falling, the ceiling, far away, beat down towards him, his left arm shot out and his fingers fastened themselves into Duncombe's posterior, which was large and soft, then with a cry he fell, Duncombe on top of him.

Henry, half-stunned, lay, his leg crushed under him, his eyes closed, and waited for the end. Duncombe now could do what he liked to him, and what he liked would be something horrible. But Duncombe also, it seemed, could not stir, but lay there all over Henry, heaving up and down, the sweat from his cheek and forehead trickling into Henry's eyes, his breath coming in great desperate pants.

Then from a long way off came a voice:

'Tom—Trenchard. What the devil!' That voice seemed to electrify Duncombe. Henry felt the whole body quiver, stiffen for a moment, then slowly, very slowly raise itself.

Henry stumbled up and saw Sir Charles, not regarding him at all, but fixing his eyes only upon his brother, who stood, his hair on end, his shirt torn and exposing a red hairy chest, wrath in his eyes, his mouth trembling with anger and also with some other emotion.

'What have you been doing, Tom?'

'This damned——' then to Henry's immense surprise he broke off and left the room almost at a run.

Sir Charles went straight to his table, looked at the papers, glanced at the drawers, then finally at the key, which was still on the hook.

His voice, when he spoke, was that of the saddest, loneliest, most miserable of men.

'You'd better go and clean up, Henry,' he said, pointing to the farther room.

He had never called him Henry before.

CHAPTER IV

THE CAULDRON

But the day had not finished with Henry yet.

When he had washed and tidied himself, and discovered to his great relief that his pince-nez were not broken, and that only one button (and that an unimportant one) was torn from his trousers, he departed. Sir Charles asked him no questions, but only sat there at his table, staring at his paper with a fixed look of melancholy absorption that Henry dared not break. As no questions were asked, Henry offered no explanations. He was very glad that he had not to offer any. He simply said, 'Good afternoon, sir,' and went. He was half expecting that Tom Duncombe would be hiding behind some pillar in the hall, and would spring out upon him as he passed, but there was no sign of anybody. The house was as silent and dead as the Nether Tomb.

He walked through the crowded ways to Peter Street in a fine turmoil of excitement and agitation. The physical side of the struggle was not yet forgotten, his shins, where Tom Duncombe had kicked him, were very sore indeed, and his leg would suddenly tremble for no particular reason.

His chest was sore, and his head ached from

his enemy's vigorous hair-pulling. He was very thankful that his face was not marked. That was because he had held his head down. But the physical consequences were lost in consideration of the deeper, more important spiritual and material issues. What had Tom Duncombe really been after? Plainly enough something that he had been after before. One could tell that from his brother's silence. What revenge would Tom now try to take upon Henry? Perhaps he would bribe Mr. King to murder him in his sleep, or would send Henry poison in a box of chocolates, or distil fly-papers into his coffee as Seddon had done to poor Miss Barrow? Perhaps he would have him assassinated by some Bolshevik agent, in the middle of Piccadilly? No, all these things, delightful though they sounded, were not likely —Tom Duncombe was obviously lacking in imagination.

A beautiful *Vers libre* flew like a coloured dove into Henry's brain just as he crossed the Circus :

Red-chested Minotaur
Thrust
Blow on Blow.
Golden apples showering
From Autumn trees
In wolf-haunted
Forest—

Had he not been sworn at by the driver of a swiftly advancing taxi-cab he might have thought of a second verse equally good.

Arriving at his destination, he found Mrs. Jenssen all alone, seated at the table playing Patience with a pack of very greasy cards. One useful lesson at least Henry was to learn from this eventful year, a

lesson that would do him splendid service throughout his life—namely, that there is nothing more difficult than to discover a human being, man or woman, who is really wicked all the way round and the whole way through. People who *seem* to be thoroughly wicked, whom one passionately desires to be thoroughly wicked, will suddenly betray kindnesses, softnesses, amiabilities, imbecilities that simply do not go with the rest of their terrible character. This is very sad and makes life much more difficult than it ought to be.

It is indeed to be doubted whether a completely wicked human being has ever appeared on this planet.

It had already puzzled Henry on several occasions that Mrs. Jenssen, who as nearly resembled a completely wicked person as he had ever beheld, should care so passionately for the simple game of Patience, and should take flowers, as he discovered that she did, once a week to the Children's Hospital in Cleseden Street.

He would so greatly have preferred that she should not do these things. She did them, it might be, as a blind, a concealment, an alibi, even as Count Fosco had his white mice and Uncle Silas played the flute, but they did not *appear* to be a disguise ; she seemed to enjoy doing them.

She greeted Henry with great affection. She had been very kind to him of late. He did not like her any better than on his first vision of her ; he liked her, indeed, far less. He did not know any one, man or woman, from whom sex so indecently protruded. It was always as though she sat quite naked in front of him and that she liked it to be so.

She had once made what even his innocent mind understood as improper advances to him, and he had not now the very slightest doubt of the reason why the various gentlemen, of all sizes and ages, came and had tea with her.

All this made him very sick and put him into an agony of desire to seize Christina and deliver her from the horrible place, but until now he had not thought of any plan, and one of his principal difficulties was that he could never succeed in being with Christina alone.

He realised that Mrs. Jenssen had not as yet sufficiently made up her wicked mind about him. She was hesitating, he perceived, as to whether he was worth her while or no. He had no doubt but that she had been making inquiries about him and his family. Was she speculating about him as a husband for her daughter? Or had she some other plans in her evil head?

To-day the room was close and stuffy and dingy in spite of the pink silk. There was a smell of cooking that writhed in and out of the furniture, some evil but savoury mess that was onions and yet not onions at all, here black pudding and there stewing eels, once ducks' eggs and then again sheeps' brain—just such a savoury mess as any witch would have stewing in her cauldron.

Mrs. Jenssen, on this afternoon, proceeded to deliver herself of some of her thoughts, her large face crimson above her purple dress, her rings flashing over the shabby dog-eared cards. Henry sat there, his eyes on the door, listening, listening for the step that he would give all the world to hear.

'You know,' she said, cursing through her teeth at the bad order of the cards, 'the matter with

me is that I'm too good-natured. I've got a kind heart—that's the matter with me. I'm sorry for it. I'm a fool to let myself go as I do. And what have I ever got for my kindness?—damn that club. What but ingratitude and cheating? It's the way of the world. You're young. You just remember that. Don't let your heart go. Use your intelligence.'

'What,' asked Henry, who wished to discover from her something about Christina's earlier life, 'kind of a town is Copenhagen? How did you like Denmark?'

'Ugh!' said Mrs. Jenssen. 'I'm an Englishwoman, I am—born in Bristol and bred there, thank God. None of your bloody foreign countries for me. Twenty years of my life wasted in that stinking hole. Not that my husband was so bad—not as husbands go, that is. He was a sailor and away many a time, and a good thing too. Fine upstanding man he was, with yellow curls and a chest broad enough to put a table on. He'd smack my ass and say, "There's a woman for you! There's a woman for you!" and so I was, and am still for the matter of that.'

'Was Christina your only child?' asked Henry.

'Yes. What do you take me for? No more children for me after the first one. "No," I said to David. "Behave as you like," I said, "but no more children for me." Wouldn't have had that one if I hadn't been such a blighted young fool. What's life for if you're lying up all the time? But David was all right. Drowned at sea. I always told him he would be.'

'Well, then, why weren't you happy?'

'Happy,' she echoed. 'I tell you Copenhagen's

a stinking town. Dirty little place. And his relations! There was a crew for you, especially a damned brother of his with a long beard like a goat, who was always round interfering. Didn't want me to have any gentleman friends. "Oh you go to hell," I said. "I'll have what friends I damn well please." Wanted to take my girl away from me. There's a nice thing! When a woman's a widow and all alone in the world and doing all she can for her girl, for a bloody relation to come along and try to take her away!'

'What did he want to take her away for?' asked Henry.

'How the hell should I know? That's what I asked him. "What do you want to take her away for?" I asked him. He called me dirty names then, so I just called him dirty names back. Two can play at that game. I hadn't been educated in Bristol for nothing. Then they went on interfering, so I just brought her over here.'

Henry was longing to ask some more questions when the door opened and Christina came in.

'Well, deary,' said her mother. 'Here's Mr. Trenchard.'

Christina smiled, then stood there uncertainly.

'There's a man coming upstairs, mother, who said you'd asked him to call. He wouldn't give his name.'

Steps sounded outside. There was a pause, a knock on the door. Mrs. Jenssen looked at them both uncertainly.

'What do you say to taking Christina out to tea, Mr. Trenchard? It won't do her any harm.'

Henry said he would be delighted, as for sure he would.

'Well, then, suppose you do—some nice tea-shop. I know you'll look after her.'

The girl moved to the door. Henry opened it for her. On the other side was standing a large heavy man, some country-fellow he seemed, young, brown-faced, in rough blue clothes.

Christina slipped by, her head down. In the street Henry found her crying. He didn't speak to her or ask her any questions. In silence they went down Peter Street.

When they were in Shaftesbury Avenue, Henry said, very gently :

'Where would you like to have tea ? I'd want to take you to the grandest place there is if you'd care for that.'

She shook her head. 'No, no, nowhere grand. . . .' She paused, standing still and looking about her as though she were utterly lost. Then he saw her, with a great effort, drag herself together. 'There's a little place in Dean Street,' she said. 'A little Spanish restaurant—opposite the theatre.'

He had been there several times to have a Spanish omelette which was cheap and very good. The kind little manager was a friend of his. He took her there wondering that he was not more triumphant on this the first occasion when he had been alone with her in the outside world—but he could not be triumphant when she was so unhappy.

He found, as he had hoped he would, a little deserted table in the window shut off from the rest of the room by the door. It was very private, with the light evening sunshine beyond the glass and people passing to and fro, and a little queue of men and women already beginning to form outside

the pit door of the Royalty Theatre. The little manager brought them their tea and smiled and made little chirping noises and left them to themselves.

She was in great distress, not noticing her tea, staring in front of her as Henry had often seen her unconsciously do before, rolling her handkerchief between her hands into a little wet ball.

'I wanted us to come. I'm glad we've had the chance. I've been wanting for weeks to explain something to you.' Henry poured her tea out for her, and mechanically, still staring beyond him, beyond the shop, beyond London, she drank it.

'You've been very good these months, very very good. I don't know why, because you didn't know me before, nor anything about me. One day I laughed at you and I'm sorry for that. You are not to be laughed at—you have not that character—not at all—anywhere.'

She paused, and Henry, looking into her face, said:

'I haven't been good to you. I'm ashamed because these weeks have all gone by and I haven't helped you yet. But you needn't say why do I come and why am I your friend? I love you. I loved you the first moment I saw you in Piccadilly. I've never loved anybody before, and I feel now as though I shall never love anybody again. But I will do anything for you, or go anywhere. You only have to say and I will try and do that.'

Her gaze came inwards, leaving those wide unscalable horizons whither she had gone and travelling back to the simple untidy face of Henry. His eyes at any rate were good enough for you to be quite sure that he meant honestly all that he

said. 'That's it,' she said quickly. 'That's what I must try to explain to you. I've wanted to say to you before that perhaps I have made you think what isn't true. I like you. You're the only friend I've had since I came to England. But I can't love you, you dear good boy, nor I can't love anybody. I will not forget you if I can once get out of this horrible place, but I have no thoughts of love—not for any one—until I can come home again.

'You saw me crying just now. I should not cry ; my father used to say, "Christina, always be strong and not show them you're weak," but I cry, not from weakness, but from deep, deep shame at that woman and what you see in her house.'

She suddenly took his hand. 'You are not angry because I don't love you ? You see, I have only one thought—to get home, to get home, to get home ! '

Henry choked in his throat and could only stare back at her and try to smile.

'Well, then,' she said, smiling. 'Now I will try to tell you who I am. That woman—that horrible woman—whom they call my mother, and I too, to my shame, call her so—she was the wife of my father. From my birth she was cruel to me, she always hated me. When my father was at home she could not touch me—he would not allow her—but when he was at sea then she could do what she wished. My father was a hero, he was the finest of all Danish men, and when a Dane is fine no one in the world is as fine as he. He loved me and I loved him. Every one must love him, how he sang and danced and played like a child ! After a time he hated the woman he'd married, because she was cruel, and he would have taken me

away with him on his ship, but of course he could not. And then father was drowned—one night I knew it. I saw him. He came to my bed and smiled at me and he was all dripping with water. Then that woman was terrible to me, and my two uncles, father's brothers, who were almost as fine as he, tried to take me away, but she was too quick for them. And when they quarrelled with her, she ran away in the night and brought me over here.'

Henry sighed in sympathy with her.

'Yes, and here it is terrible. I do not think I can endure it very much more. My uncle wrote and said he would come for me, and that is why I have been waiting, because I am sure that he will come.

'But now I think that woman is planning something else. She wants to sell me to some man so that she herself can be free. She is in doubt about several. That old man you saw the other day is one. He is very rich, and has a castle. Then she has been for some while in doubt about whether perhaps you will do. I don't care for it when she beats me, and when she says terrible things to me, but it is the fear of the future, and she may do worse than she has ever done—she threatens . . . and when I am alone at night—often all night—I am so afraid. . . .'

'Alone?' said Henry. 'Isn't she there?'

'She has another place—somewhere in Victoria Street. Often she is away all night.'

'Then,' said Henry eagerly, 'it's quite easy. We'll escape one night. I can get enough money together and I will travel with you to Copenhagen and give you to your uncle.'

She shook her head. 'No. You are a sweet

boy, but that is no good. She has the place always watched. The police would stop us at once. She is a very clever woman.'

'But then,' pursued Henry, 'if that house in Peter Street is a bad house, and she is keeping you, that is against the law, and we can have her arrested.'

Christina shook her head.

'No. She is a very clever woman indeed. Nothing wrong goes on there. Perhaps in Victoria Street. I don't know. I have never been there. But I am sure if you tried to catch her in Victoria Street you would not be able to. There is nothing to be done that way. But see . . .'

She leant over towards Henry across the table, dropping her voice.

'Next December I shall be twenty-one and shall be free. It is before that that I am afraid. I know she is making some plan in her head. If I feel that you are watching, then I shall be safer. She wants to get a lot of money for me, and I think perhaps that old Mr. Leishman whom you saw is arranging something with her.

'What you want to do is to be friends with her so long as you can, so that you may come to us freely. But one day she will have made up her mind, and then there will be a scene, and she will forbid you the house. I will let you know when it is serious. I will try to tell you where I have gone. If I do that, it will mean that it is very anxious, and you must help me any way you can. Will you promise me?'

'I promise,' said Henry. 'Wherever I am, whatever I am doing, I will come.'

'I have written to my uncle and I know he

will come if he can. But he travels very much abroad, and my other uncle is in Japan. If they do not get my letter, I have no one—no one but you.'

She took Henry's hand again. 'Since father died I can't love any one,' she said. 'But I can be your friend and never forget you. I have been so long frightened now, and I am so tired and so ashamed, that I think all deeper feeling is dead.

'I only want to get home. Do you understand, and not think me false?'

Henry said, 'I'm just as proud as I can be.'

Then, saying very little, he took her back to Peter Street.

CHAPTER V

MILLIE IN LOVE

MEANWHILE, as Henry was having his adventures, so, also, was Millie having hers, and having them, even as Henry did, in a sudden climacteric moment after many weeks of ominous pause.

She knew well enough that that pause was ominous. It would have been difficult for her to avoid knowing it. The situation began to develop directly after the amateur performance of *The Importance of Being Earnest.* That same performance was a terrible and disgracefully public failure. It had been arranged originally with the outward and visible purpose of benefiting a Babies' Crèche that had its home somewhere in Maida Vale, and had never yet apparently been seen by mortal man. Clarice, however, cared little either for babies or the crèches that contain them, but was quite simply and undisguisedly aching to prove to the world in general that she was a better actress than Miss Irene Vanbrugh, the creator of her part.

The charity and kindliness of an audience at an amateur theatrical performance are always called upon to cover a multitude of sins, but perhaps never before in the history of amateur acting did quite so many sins need covering as on this occasion

—sins of omission, sins of commission, and sins of bad temper and sulkiness. Clarice knew her part only at happy intervals, but young Mr. Baxter knew his not at all, and tried to conceal his ignorance with cheery smiles and impromptu remarks about the weather, and little paradoxes that were in his own opinion every bit as good as Oscar Wilde's, with the additional advantage of novelty. Mr. Baxter was, indeed, at the end of the performance thoroughly pleased with himself and the world in general, and was the only actor in the cast who could boast of that happy condition.

Next morning in the house of the Platts the storm broke, and Millie found, to her bewildered amazement, that she was, in one way and another, considered the villainess of the piece. That morning was never to be forgotten by Millie.

She was not altogether surprised that there should be a storm. For many days past the situation had been extremely difficult, only four days earlier, indeed, she had wondered whether she could possibly endure it any longer, and might have gone straight to Victoria and resigned her post had she not had five minutes' encouraging conversation with little Doctor Brooker, who had persuaded her that she was doing valuable work and must remain. There were troubles with Clarice, troubles with Ellen (very curious ones), troubles with Victoria, troubles with the housekeeper, even troubles with Beppo. All the attendant guests in the house (except the poor Balaclavas) looked upon her with hatred because they knew that she despised them for their sycophancy and that they deserved her scorn. Her troubles with Victoria were the worst, because after all did Victoria support her nothing

else very seriously mattered. But Victoria, like all weak characters determined upon power, swayed like a tree in the wind, now hither now thither, according to the emotions of the moment. She told Millie that she loved her devotedly, then suddenly would her mild eyes narrow with suspicion when she heard Millie commanding Beppo to bring up some more coal with what seemed to her a voice of too incisive authority. She said to Millie that the duty of the secretary was to control the servants, and then when the housekeeper came with bitter tales of that same secretary's autocracy she sided with the housekeeper. She thought Clarice a fool, but listened with readiness to everything that Clarice had to say about 'upstart impertinence,' 'a spy in the house,' and so on. She had by this time conceived a hatred and a loathing for Mr. Block and longed to transfer him to some very distant continent, but when he came to her with tears in his eyes and said that he would never eat another roll of bread in a house where he was so looked down upon by 'the lady secretary,' she assured him that Millie was of no importance, and begged him to continue to break bread with her so long as there was bread in the house.

She complained with bitterness of the confusion of her correspondence, and admired enthusiastically the order and discipline into which Millie had brought it, and yet, from an apparently wilful perverseness, she created further confusion whenever she could, tumbling letters and bills and invitations together, and playing a kind of drawing-room football with her papers as though Dr. Brooker had told her that this was one of the ways of warding off stoutness.

This question of her stoutness was one of Millie's most permanent troubles. Victoria now had 'Stoutness on the Brain,' a disease that never afflicted her at all in the old days when she was poor, partly because she had too much work in those days to allow time for idle thinking, and partly because she had no money to spend on cures.

Now one cure followed upon another. She tried various systems of diet but, being a greedy woman and loving sweet and greasy foods, a grilled chop and an 'asbestos' biscuit were real agony to her. Then, for a time, she stripped to the skin twice a day and begged Millie to roll her upon the floor, a performance that Millie positively detested. She weighed herself solemnly every morning and evening, and her temper was spoilt for the day when she had not lost but had indeed gained.

It must not be supposed, however, that she was always irritable and in evil temper. Far from it; between her gusts of despair, anger, and assaulted pride she was very sweet indeed, assuring Millie that she was a wicked woman and deserved no mercy from any one.

'I cannot think how you can endure me, my Millie,' she would say. 'You sweet creature! Wonderful girl! What I've done without you all these years I cannot imagine. I mean well. I do indeed. I'm sure there isn't a woman in the country who wants every one to be happy as I do. How simple it seems! Happiness! What a lovely word, and yet how difficult of attainment! Life isn't nearly as simple as it was in the days when dear papa was alive. I'm sure when I had nothing at all in the bank and didn't dare to face kind Mr. Miller for days together because I knew

that I had had more money out of his bank than I had ever put into it, life was simplicity—but now —what do you think is the matter with me, my Millie? Tell me truthfully, straight from your loyal heart.'

Millie longed to tell her that what was the matter could all be found in that one word 'Money!' but the time for direct and honest speech, woman to woman, was not quite yet, although it was, most surely, close at hand.

With Ellen the trouble was more mysterious—Millie did not understand that strange woman. After the scene in Ellen's room for many days she held aloof, not speaking to Millie at all. Then gradually she approached again, and one morning came into the room where Millie was working, walked up to her desk, bent over her and kissed her passionately, and walked straight out of the room again without uttering a word. A few days later she mysteriously pressed a note into her hand. This was what it said:

DARLING MILLIE—You must forgive any oddness of behaviour that I have shown during these last weeks. I have had one headache after another, and have been very miserable too for other reasons with which I need not bother you. I know you think me strange, but indeed you have no more devoted friend than I if only you would believe it. Some may seem friends to you but are not really. Do not take every one at their face value. It is sweet of you to do so, but you run great risks. Could we not be a little more together than we are? I should like it so much if we could one day have a walk together. I feel that you do not understand me, and it is true that I am not at my best in this unsympathetic household. I feel that you shrink from me sometimes. If I occasionally appear demonstrative it is because I have so much love in

my nature that has no outlet. I am a lonely woman, Millie. You have my heart in your hands. Treat it gently !—Your loving friend, ELLEN PLATT.

This letter irritated and annoyed Millie. Her hands were full enough already without having Ellen's heart added to everything else. And why need Ellen be so mysterious, warning her about people? That was underhand. Did she suspect anybody she should speak out. Millie walked about cautiously for the next few days lest she should find herself alone with Ellen, when the woman looked so miserable that her heart was touched, and one morning, meeting her in the hall, she said :

'It was kind of you to write that note, Ellen. Of course we'll have a walk one day.'

Ellen stared at her under furious eyebrows. 'If that's all you can say,' she exclaimed, 'thank you for nothing. Catch me giving myself away again,' and brushed angrily past her. . . .

So on the morning after the theatricals down came the storm. It began with the housekeeper, Mrs. Martin. Sitting under Eve, Millie examined the household books for the last fortnight.

'The butcher's very large,' she observed.

'Honk !' Mrs. Martin remarked from some unprobed depths of an outraged woman. She was a little creature with an upturned nose and a grey complexion.

'Well, it really is too large this time,' said Millie. 'Twenty pounds for a fortnight even in these days——'

'Certingly,' said Mrs. Martin, speaking very quickly and rising a little on her toes. 'Certingly if I'm charged with dishonesty, and it's implied

that I'm stealing the butcher's meat and deceiving my mistress, who has always, so far as *I* know, trusted me and found no fault at all and has indeed commented not once nor twice on my being economical, but if so, well, my notice is the thing that's wanted, I suppose, and——'

'Not at all,' said Millie, still very gently. 'There's no question of any one's dishonesty, Mrs. Martin. As you're housekeeper as well as cook you must know better than any one else whether this is an unusual amount or no. Perhaps it isn't. Perhaps——'

'I may have my faults,' Mrs. Martin broke in, 'there's few of us who haven't, but dishonesty I've never before been accused of; although the times are difficult and those who don't have to buy the things themselves may imagine that meat costs nothing, and you can have a joint every quarter of an hour without having to pay for it, still that hasn't been my experience, and to be called a dishonest woman after all my troubles and the things I've been through——'

'I never did call you a dishonest woman,' said Millie. 'Never for a moment. I only want you to examine this book with me and see whether we can't bring it down a little——'

'Dishonesty,' pursued Mrs. Martin, rising still higher on her toes and apparently addressing Eve, 'is dishonesty and there's no way out of it, either one's dishonest or one isn't, and—if one is dishonest the sooner one leaves and finds a place where one isn't the better for all parties, and the least said the soonest mended——'

'*Would* you mind,' said Millie with an admirable patience, 'just casting your eye over this book and

telling me what you think of it? That's all I want really.'

'Then I hope, miss,' said Mrs. Martin, 'that you'll take back your accusation that I shouldn't like to go back to the kitchen suffering under, because I never *have* suffered patiently under such an accusation and I never will.'

'I made no accusation,' said Millie. 'If I hurt your feelings I'm sorry, but do please let us get to work and look at this book together. Time's short and there's so much to be done.'

But Mrs. Martin was a woman of one idea at a time. 'If you doubt my character, miss, please speak to Miss Platt about it, and if *she* has a complaint well and good and I'll take her word for it, she having known me a good deal longer than many people and not one to rush to conclusions as some are perhaps with justice and perhaps not.'

Upon this particular morning Millie was to lose her temper on three separate occasions. This was the first occasion.

'That's enough, Mrs. Martin,' she said sharply. 'I did not call you dishonest. I do not now. But as you seem incapable of looking at this book I will show it to Miss Platt and she shall discuss it with you. That's everything, thank you, good morning.'

'Honk!' said Mrs. Martin. 'Then if that's the way I'm to be treated the only thing that's left for me to do is hand in my notice which I do with the greatest of pleasure, and until you came, miss, I should never have dreamt of such a thing, being well suited, but *such* treatment no human being can stand!'

'Very well, then,' said Millie, cold with anger.

'If you feel you must go, you must. I'm sorry, but you must act as you feel.'

Mrs. Martin turned round and marched towards the door muttering to herself. Just before she reached it Victoria and Clarice entered. Mrs. Martin looked at them, muttered something and departed, banging the door behind her.

Millie could see that Victoria was already upset, her large fat face puckered into the expression of a baby who is not sure whether it will cry or no. Clarice, her yellow hair untidy and her pink gown trembling with unexpected little pieces of lace and flesh, was quite plainly in a very bad temper.

'What's the matter with Mrs. Martin?' said Victoria, coming through into the inner room. 'She seems to be upset about something.'

'She is,' said Millie shortly. 'She's just given notice.'

'Given notice!' cried Victoria. 'Oh dear, oh dear! What shall we do? Millie, how could you let her? She's been with us longer than any servant we've had since father died, and she cooks so well considering everything. She knows our ways now, and I've always been so careful to give her everything she wanted. Oh, Millie, how could you? You really shouldn't have done it?'

'I didn't do it,' said Millie. '*She* did it. I simply asked her to look at the butcher's book for the last fortnight. It was disgracefully large. She chose to be insulted and gave notice.'

'Isn't that vexing?' cried Victoria. 'I do think you might have managed better, Millie. She isn't a woman who easily takes offence either. She's taken such a real interest in us all, and nothing's been too much trouble for her!'

'Meanwhile,' Millie said, 'she's been robbing you right and left. You know she has, Victoria. You as good as admitted it to me the other day. Of course if you want to go on being plundered, Victoria, it's no affair of mine. Only tell me so, and I shall know where I am.'

'I don't think you ought to speak to me like that,' said Victoria. 'It's not kind of you. I didn't quite expect that of you, Millie. You know the troubles I have, and I hoped you were going to help me with them and not give me new ones.'

'I'm not giving you new ones,' Millie answered. 'I am trying to save you. However——'

It was at this point that Clarice interrupted. 'Now I hope at last, Victoria,' she said, 'that your eyes are opened. It only supports what I was saying downstairs. Miss Trenchard (Clarice had been calling her Miss Trenchard for the last fortnight) may be clever and attractive, and certainly young men seem to think her so, but suited to be your secretary she is not.'

Millie got up from her seat. 'Isn't this beginning to be rather personal?' she said. 'Hadn't we all better wait until we are a little cooler?'

'No, we had not,' said Clarice, trembling with anger. 'I'm glad this occasion has come at last. I've been waiting for it for weeks. I'm not one to be underhand and to say things behind people's backs that I would not dare to say to their faces, I say just what I think. I know, Miss Trenchard, that you despise me and look down upon me. Of that I have nothing to say. It may be deserved or it may not. I am here, however, to protect my sister. There are things that she is too warm-hearted and kind-natured to see although they do

go on right under my very nose. There have been occasions before when I've had to point circumstances out to her. I've never hesitated at what was I thought my duty. I do not hesitate now. I tell you frankly, Miss Trenchard, that I think your conduct during these last weeks has been quite disgraceful. You have alienated all Victoria's best friends, disturbed the servants, and flirted with every young man that has come into the house ! '

This was the second occasion on which Millie lost her temper that morning.

' Thank you,' she said. ' Now I know where I stand. But you'll apologise, please, for that last insult before you leave this room.'

' I will not ! I will not ! ' cried Clarice.

' Oh dear, what shall I do ? ' interrupted Victoria. ' I knew this was going to be a terrible day the moment I got out of bed this morning. Clarice, you really shouldn't say such things.'

' I should ! I should ! ' cried Clarice, stamping her foot. ' She's ruined everything since she came into the house. No one knows how I worked at that horrible play, and Bunny Baxter was beginning to be so good, most amusing, and knowing his part perfectly, until she came along. And then she turns his head and he fancies he's in love with her and the whole thing goes to pieces. And I always said, right away from the beginning, that we oughtn't to have Cissie Marrow as prompter, she always loses her head and turns over two pages at once—and now I've gone and made myself the laughing-stock of London and shall never be able to act in public again ! '

The sight of Clarice's despair touched Millie, and when the poor woman turned from them and

stood facing the window, snuffling into a handkerchief, her anger vanished as swiftly as it had come.

Besides, what *were* they quarrelling about, three grown women? Here was life passing, and so much to be done, and they could stand and scream at one another like children in the nursery. Millie's subconscious self seemed to be saying to her, 'I stand outside you. I obscure you. This is not real, but I am real and something behind life is real. Laugh at this. It vanishes like smoke. *This* is not life.' She suddenly smiled; laughter irradiated all her face, shining in her eyes, colouring her cheek.

'Clarice, I'm sorry. If I've been a pig to you all these weeks I certainly didn't mean to be. It hasn't been very easy—not through anybody's fault, but simply because I'm so inexperienced. I'm sure that I've been very trying to all of you. But why should we squabble like this? I don't know what's happened to all of us this year. We stood far worse times during the War without losing our tempers, and we all of us put up with one another. But now we all seem to get angry at the slightest thing. I've noticed it everywhere. The little things now are much harder to bear than the big things were in the War. Please be friends, Clarice, and believe me that I didn't mean to hurt you.'

At this sudden softening Clarice burst into louder sobbing and nothing was to be heard but 'Ouch! Ouch! Ouch!' proceeding from the middle of the handkerchief.

All might now have been well had not Victoria most unfortunately suddenly bethought herself of Mrs. Martin.

'All the same, Millie,' she said, 'it wasn't quite kindly of you to speak to Clarice like that when you knew that she must be tired after all the trouble she had with her acting, and I'm sure I thought it went very nicely indeed, although there was a little confusion in the middle which I'm certain nobody noticed half as much as Clarice thought they did. And I do wish, Millie, that you hadn't spoken to Mrs. Martin like that. I simply don't know what we shall do without her. We'll never get any one else as good. I'm sure she never spoke to me rudely. She only wants careful handling. I do so detest registry offices and seeing one woman worse than another. I *do* think you're to blame, Millie.'

Whereupon Millie lost her temper for the third time that morning, and on this occasion very thoroughly indeed.

'All right,' she said, 'that finishes it. You can have my month's notice, Victoria, as well as Mrs. Martin's—I've endured it as well as I could and as long as I could. I've been nearly giving you notice a hundred times. And before I *do* go let me just tell you that I think you're the greatest coward, Victoria, that ever walked upon two feet. How many secretaries have you had in the last two months? Dozens, I should fancy. And why? Because you never support them in anything. You tell them to go and do a thing, and then when they do it desert them because some one else in the house disapproves. You gave me authority over the servants, told me to dismiss them if they weren't satisfactory, and then when at last I do dismiss one of them you tell me I was wrong to do it. I try to bring this house into something like order, and then

you upset me at every turn as though you didn't *want* there to be any order at all. You aren't loyal, Victoria, that's what's the matter with you—and until you *are* you'll never get any one to stay with you. I'm going a month from to-day, and I wish you luck with your next selection.'

She had sufficient time to perceive with satisfaction Victoria's terrified stare and to hear the startled arrest of Clarice's sobs. She had marched to the door, she had looked back upon them both, had caught Victoria's 'Millie! you can't——' The door was closed behind her and she was out upon the silent sunlit staircase.

Breathless, agitated with a confusion of anger and penitence, indignation and regret, she ran downstairs and almost into the arms of young Mr. Baxter. Oh! how glad she was to see him! Here at any rate was a *man*—not one of these eternal women with their morbidities and hysterias and scenes! His very smile, his engaging youth, and his air of humorous detachment were jewels beyond any price to Millie just then.

'Why, what's the matter?' he cried.

'Oh, I don't know!' she answered. 'I don't know whether I'm going to laugh or cry or what I'm going to do! Oh, those women! Those *women*! Bunny—take me somewhere. Do something with me. Out of this. I'm off my head this morning.'

'Come in here!' he said, drawing her with him towards a little poky room on the right of the hall-door that was used indifferently as a box-room, a writing-room, and a room for Beppo to retire into when he was waiting to pounce out upon a ring at the door. It was dirty, littered with hat-boxes and

feminine paraphernalia. An odious room; nevertheless this morning the sun was shining into it, the roses on the carpet glowed with delight, and young Baxter knew that his moment had come.

He pushed Millie in before him, closed the door, flung his arms around her and kissed her all over her face. She pulled herself away.

'You . . . You . . . What *is* the matter with every one this morning?'

He looked at her with eyes dancing with delight.

'I'm sorry. I ought to have warned you. You looked so lovely I couldn't help myself. Millie, I adore you. I have done ever since I first met you. I love you. I love you. You must marry me. We'll be happy for ever and ever.'

There were so many things that Millie should have said. The simple truth was that she had been in love with him for weeks and had no other thought but that.

'We can't marry,' she said at last feebly. 'We're both very young. We've got no money.'

'Young!' said Bunny scornfully. 'Why, I'm twenty-seven, and as to money I'll soon make some. Millie, come here!'

She who had but now scolded the Miss Platts as though they were school children went to him.

'See!' he put his hands on her shoulders, staring into her eyes, 'I oughtn't to have kissed you like that just now. It wasn't right. I'm going to begin properly now. Dear Millicent, will you marry me?'

'What will your mother——?'

'Dear Millicent, will you marry me?'

'But if you haven't any money?'

'Dear Millicent, will you marry me?'

'Yes.'

She suddenly put her arms around him and hugged him as though he had been a favourite puppy or an infant of very tender years. She felt about him like that. Then they simply sat hand in hand on a pile of packing-cases in the corner of the room. He suddenly put his hand up and stroked her hair.

'Funny!' she said. 'Some one did that the other day and I hated it.'

'Who dared?'

She laughed. 'No one you need be jealous of.'

Poor Ellen! She felt now that she loved all the world, Clarice and Mrs. Martin included.

'You won't mind if we keep our engagement dark for a week or two?' he asked.

'Why?' She turned round and looked at him.

'Oh, I don't know. It would be more fun, I think.'

'I don't think it would. I hate concealing things.'

'Oh, darling Millie, please—only for a very little time—a week or two. My mother's away in Scotland and I don't want to write it to her, I want to tell her.'

'Very well.' She would agree to anything that he wanted, but for a very brief moment a little chill of apprehension, whence she knew not, had fallen upon her heart.

'Now I must go.' She got up. They stood in a long wonderful embrace. He would not let her go. She came back to him again and again; then she broke away and, her heart beating with ecstasy and happiness, came out into the hall that now seemed dark and misty.

She stood for a moment trying to collect her

thoughts. Suddenly Victoria appeared out of nowhere as it seemed. She spoke breathlessly, as though she had been running.

'Millie . . . Millie . . . Oh, you're not going? You can't be. . . . You can't mean what you said. You mustn't go. We'll never, never get on without you. Clarice is terribly sorry she was rude, and I've given Mrs. Martin notice. You're quite right. She ought to have gone long ago. . . . You can't leave us. You can do just what you like, have what you like. . . .'

'Oh, you darling!' Millie flung her arms around her. 'I'm sorry I was cross. Of course I'll stay. I'll go and beg Clarice's pardon—anything you like. I'll beg Mrs. Martin's if you want me to. Anything you like! I'll even kiss Mr. Block if you like. . . . Do you mind? Bunny Baxter's here. Can he stay to lunch?'

'Oh, I'm so glad!' Victoria was tearfully wiping her eyes. 'I thought you might have gone already. We'll never have a word again, never. Of course he can stay, for as long as he likes. Dear me, dear me, what a morning!'

The hoarse voice of Beppo was heard to announce that luncheon was ready.

These are some letters that Millicent and Henry wrote to one another at this time:

METROPOLITAN HOTEL, CLADGATE,
July 17, 1920.

DARLING HENRY—We got down here last night and now it's ever so late—after twelve—and I'm writing in a bedroom all red and yellow, with a large picture of the Relief of Ladysmith over my bed, and it's the very first moment I've had for writing to you. What a day and what

a place to spend six weeks in ! However, Victoria seems happy and contented, which is the main thing.

It appears that she stayed in this very hotel years ago with her father when they were very poor, and they had two tiny rooms at the very top of the hotel. He wanted her to see gay life, and at great expense brought her here for a week. All the waiters were sniffy and the chambermaid laughed at her, and it has rankled ever since. Isn't it pathetic ? So she has come now for six solid weeks, bringing her car and Mr. Andrew the new chauffeur and me with her, and has taken the biggest suite in the hotel. Isn't *that* pathetic ? Clarice and Ellen, thank God, are not here, and are to arrive when they *do* come one at a time.

We had so short a meeting before I came away that there was no time to tell one another anything, and I have such *lots* to tell. I didn't think you were looking very happy, Henry dear, *or* very well. Do look after yourself. I'm glad your Baronet is taking you into the country very soon. I'm sure you need it. But do you get enough to eat with him ? His sister sounds a mean old thing and I'm sure she scrimps over the housekeeping. (Scrimps is my own word—isn't it a good one ?) Eat all you can when you're in the country. Make love to the cook. Plunder the pantry. Make a store in your attic as the burglar did in our beloved *Jim*.

One of the things I hadn't time to tell you is that I had an unholy row with every one before we came away. I told you that a storm was blowing up. It burst all right, and first the housekeeper told me what she thought and then I told the housekeeper, and then Clarice had *her* turn and Victoria had *hers*, and I had the last turn of all. I won a glorious victory and Victoria has eaten out of my hand ever since, but I'm not sure that I'm altogether glad. Since it happened Victoria's been half afraid of me, and is always looking at me as though she expected me to burst out again, and I don't like people being afraid of me—it makes me feel small.

However, there it is, and I've got her alone here all to myself, and I'll see that she isn't frightened long. Then there's something else. Something—— No, I won't tell

you yet. For one thing I promised not to tell any one, and although you aren't any one exactly, still—— But I shan't be able to keep it from you very long. I'll just tell you this, that it makes me very, very happy. Happier than I dreamt any one could ever be.

I shouldn't think Cladgate was calculated to make any one very happy. However, you never can tell. People like such odd things. All I've seen of it so far is a long, oily-grey sea like a stretch of linoleum, a pier with nobody on it, a bandstand with nobody in it, a desert of a promenade, and the inside of this hotel which is all lifts, palms, and messenger boys. But I've seen nothing yet, because I've been all day in Victoria's rooms arranging them for her. I really think I'm going to love her down here all by myself. There's something awfully touching about her. She feels all the time she isn't doing the right thing with her money. She buys all the newspapers and get shocks in every line. One moment it's Ireland, another Poland, another the Germans, and then it's the awful winter we're going to have, and all the Unemployed there are going to be. I try to read Tennis to her and all about the wonderful Tilden, and what the fashions are at this moment in Paris, and how cheerful Mr. Bottomley feels about everything, but she only listens to what she *wants* to hear. However, she really is cheerful and contented for the moment.

I had a letter from Katherine this morning. She says that mother is worse and isn't expected to live very long. Aunt Aggie's come up to see what she can do, and is fighting father and the nurse all the time. For the first time in my life I'm on Aunt Aggie's side. Any one who'll fight that nurse has me as a supporter. Katherine's going to have another baby about November and says she hopes it will be a girl. If it is it's to be called Millicent. Poor lamb! Philip's going in more and more for politics and says it's everybody's duty to fight the Extremists. He's going to stand for somewhere in the next Election.

I *must* go to bed. I'll write more in a day or two. Write to me *soon* and tell me all about everything—and Cheer Up!—Your loving MILLIE.

Have you seen Peter?

PANTON ST., *July* 21, '20.

DEAR MILLIE—Thank you very much for your letter. Cladgate sounds awful, but I daresay it will be better later on when more people come. I'll make you an awful confession, which is that there's nothing in the world I like so much as sitting in a corner in the hall of one of those big seaside hotels and watching the people. So long as I can sit there and don't have to do anything, and can just notice how silly we all look and how little we mean any of the things we say, and how over-dressed we all are and how conscious of ourselves and how bent on food, money and love, I can stay entranced for hours. . . . However, this is off the subject. What is your secret? You, knowing how inquisitive I am, are treating me badly. However, I see that you are going to tell me all about it in another letter or two, so I can afford to wait. How strangely do our young careers seem to go arm in arm together at present. What I wanted to tell you the other day, only I hadn't time, is that I also have been having a row in the house of my employer—an actual fist-to-fist combat, or rather in this case a chest-to-chest, because we were too close to one another to use our fists. 'We' was not Sir Charles and myself, but his great bullock of a brother. It was a degrading scene, and I won't go into details. The bullock tried to poke his nose into what I was told he wasn't to poke his nose into, and I tried to stop him, and we fell to the ground with a crash just as Sir Charles came in. It's ended all right for me, apparently—although I haven't seen the bullock again since.

Sir Charles is a brick, Millie; he really is. I'd do anything for him. He's awfully unhappy and worried. It's hateful sitting there and not being able to help him. He's had in a typist fellow to arrange the letters, Herbert Spencer by name. I asked him whether he were related to the great H. S. and he said no, that his parents wanted him to be and that's why they called him Herbert, but that wasn't enough. He has large spectacles and long sticky fingers and is *very* thin, but he's a nice fellow with a splendid Cockney accent. I can now concentrate on the 'tiddley-bits' which are very jolly, and what I shan't know soon about

the Edinburgh of 1800–1840 won't be worth anybody's knowing. Next week I go down with Duncombe to Duncombe Hall. Unfortunately Lady Bell-Hall goes down too. I'm sorry, because when I'm with some one who thinks poorly of me I always make a fool of myself, which I hate doing. I've been over to the house every day and inquired, but I haven't seen mother yet. Aunt Aggie is having a great time. She has ordered the nurse to leave, and the nurse has ordered her to leave; of course they'll both be there to the end. Poor mother. . . . But why don't you and I feel it more? We're not naturally hard or unfeeling. I suppose it's because we know that mother doesn't care a damn whether we feel for her or no. She put all her affection into Katherine years ago, and then when Katherine disappointed her she just refused to give it to anybody. I would like to see her for ten minutes and tell her I'm sorry I've been a pig so often, but I don't think she knows any more what's going on.

The worst of it is that I *know* that when she's dead I shall hate myself for the unkind and selfish things I've done and only remember her as she used to be years ago, when she took me to the Army and Navy Stores to buy underclothes and gave me half-a-crown after the dentist.

I'm all right. Don't you worry about me. The girl I told you about is in a terrible position, but I can't do anything at present. I can only wait until there's a crisis—and I *detest* waiting as you know. Peter's all right. He's always asking about you.

Norman and Forrest are going to reissue two of his early books, *Reuben Hallard* and *The Stone House*, and at last he's begun his novel. He says he'll probably tear it up when he's done a little, but I don't suppose he will. Do write to him. He thinks a most awful lot of you. It's important with him when he likes anybody, because he's shut up his feelings for so long that they mean a lot when they *do* come out. Write soon.—Your loving brother,

HENRY.

METROPOLITAN HOTEL, CLADGATE,
July 26, '20.

DEAREST HENRY—Thank you very much for your letters. I always like your letters because they tell me just what I want to know, which letters so seldom do. Mary Cass, for instance, tells me about her chemistry and sheep's hearts, and how her second year is going to be even harder than her first, but never anything serious.

The first thing about all this since I wrote last is that it has rained incessantly. I don't believe that there has ever been such a wet month as this July since the Flood, and rain is especially awful here because so many of the ceilings seem to have glassy bits in them, and the rain makes a noise exactly like five hundred thunderstorms, and you have to shriek to make yourself heard, and I hate shrieking. Then it's very depressing, because all the palms shiver in sympathy, and it's so dark that you have to turn on the electric light, which makes every one look hideous. But I don't care, I don't care about anything ! I'm so happy, Henry, that I —There ! I nearly let the secret out. I know that I shan't be able to keep it for many more letters, and I told him yesterday—— No, I *won't*. I must keep my promise.

Here's Victoria—I must write to you again to-morrow.

Telegram :

July 27.

Who's Him ? Let me know by return.

HENRY.

CLADGATE, *July* 28.

DEAREST HENRY—You're very imperative, aren't you ? Fancy wasting money on a telegram and your finances in the state they're in. Well, I won't tantalise you any longer ; indeed, I *can't* keep it from you, but remember that it's a secret to the whole world for some time to come.

Well. I am engaged to a man called Baxter, and I love him terribly. He doesn't know how much I love him, nor is he going to know—ever. That's the way to keep men in their places. Who is he, you say ? Well, he's a

young man who came to help Clarice with her theatricals in London. I think I loved him the very first moment I saw him—he was so young and simple and jolly and honest, and *such* a relief after all the tantrums going on elsewhere. He says he loved me from the first moment, too, and I believe he did. His people are all right. His father's dead, but his mother lives in a lovely old house in Wiltshire, and wears a white lace cap. He's the only child, and his mother (whom I haven't yet seen) adores him. It's because of her that we're keeping things quiet for the moment, because she's staying up in Scotland with some relatives, and he wants to tell her all about it by word of mouth instead of writing to her. I hate mysteries. I always did—but it seems a small thing to grant him. He's working at the Bar, but as there appears to be no chance of making a large income out of that for some time, he thinks he'll help a man in some motor works—there's nothing about motors that he doesn't know. Meanwhile, he's staying here in rooms near the hotel. Of course, Victoria has been told nothing, but I think she guesses a good deal. She'd be stupid if she didn't.

I've never been in love before. I had no conception of what it means. I'm not going to rhapsodise—you needn't be afraid, but in my secret self I've *longed* for some one to love and look after. Of course I love you, Henry dear, and always will, and certainly you need looking after, but that's different. I want to do *every*thing for Ralph (that's the name his mother gave him, but most people call him Bunny), mend his socks, cook his food, comfort him in trouble, laugh with him when he's happy, be poor with him, be rich with him, *anything*, *everything*. Of course I mustn't show him I want to do all that, it wouldn't be good for him, and we must both keep our independence, but I never knew that love took you so entirely outside yourself, and threw you so completely inside some one else.

Now you're quite different; I don't mean that your way of being in love isn't just as good as mine, but it's *different*. With you it's all in the romantic idea. I believe you like it better when she slips away from you, always just beyond you, so that you can keep your idea without tarnishing it by contact. You want yours to be beautiful—I

want mine to be real. And Bunny *is* real. There's no doubt about it at all.

Oh! I do hope you'll like him. You're so funny about people. One never knows what you're going to think. He's quite different from Peter, of course—he's *much* younger for one thing, and he isn't *intellectually* clever. Not that he's stupid, but he doesn't care for your kind of books and music. I'm rather glad of that. I don't want my husband to be cleverer than I am. I want him to respect me.

I'm terribly anxious for you both to meet. Bunny says he'll be afraid of you. You sound so clever. It's still raining, but of course I don't care. Victoria is a sweet pet and will go to Heaven.—Your loving sister,

MILLICENT.

P.S.—Don't tell Peter.

PANTON ST., *July* 30.

MY DEAR MILL—I don't quite know what to say. Of course, I want you to be happy, and I'd do anything to make you so, but somehow he doesn't sound quite the man I expected you to marry. Are you *sure*, Millie dear, that he didn't seem nice just because everybody at the Platts seemed horrid? However, whatever will make you happy will please me. As soon as I come up from Duncombe I must meet him, and give you both my grand-paternal blessing. We go down to Duncombe to-morrow, and if it goes on raining like this, it will be pretty damp, I expect. I won't pretend that I'm feeling very cheerful. *My* affair is in a horrid state. I can't bear to leave her, and yet there's nothing else for me to do. However, I shall be able to run up about once a week and see her. Her mother is still friendly, but I expect a row at any moment. This news of yours seems to have removed you suddenly miles away. It's selfish of me to feel that, but it was all so grizzly at home yesterday that for the moment I'm depressed. Oh, Millie, I do hope you'll be happy. . . . You must be, you must!—Your loving brother,

HENRY.

CHAPTER VI

HENRY AT DUNCOMBE

On the late afternoon of Wednesday, August 4, Henry found himself standing in the pouring rain on the little wind-driven platform of Salting Marting, the station for Duncombe.

He was trying to whistle as he stood under the eaves of the little hideous roof, his hands deep in his waterproof, his eyes fixed sternly upon a pile of luggage over which he was mounting guard. The car ordered to meet them had not appeared, the ancient Moffatt was staring down the wet road in search of it, Sir Charles was telephoning, and Lady Bell-Hall shivering over the simulacrum of a fire in the little waiting-room.

Henry did not feel very cheerful ; this was not a happy prelude to a month at Duncombe Hall, and the weather had been during the last few weeks more than even England's reputation could tolerate.

Henry was very susceptible to atmosphere, and now the cold and wet and gathering dusk seemed to have been sent towards him from Duncombe and to speak ominously in his ear of what he would find there.

He had seldom in all his young life felt so lonely,

and he seemed to be back in the War again, waiting in a muddy trench for dawn to break and . . .

'I've succeeded in procuring something,' wheezed Moffatt in his ear, 'if you'd kindly assist with the luggage, Mr. Blanchard.'

(It was one of Moffatt's most trying peculiarities that he could not master Henry's name.)

'Why, it's a four-wheeler!' Henry heard Lady Bell-Hall miserably exclaim.

'It's all I could do, m'lady,' creaked Moffatt. 'Very difficult 's time of the evening. Did m'best, m'lady.'

They climbed inside and were soon rising and sinking in a grey dusk, whilst boxes, bags, and packages surged around them. There was complete silence, and at last Lady Bell-Hall went to sleep on Henry's shoulder, to his extreme physical pain, because a hatpin stuck sharply into his shoulder, and spiritual alarm, because he knew how deeply she would resent his support when she woke up. Strange thoughts flitted through his head as he bumped and jolted to the rattle of the wheels. They were dead, stumbling to the Styx, other coaches behind them; he could fancy the white faces peering from the windows, the dark coachman and yet other grey figures stealing from the dusky hedges and climbing in to their fore-destined places. The Styx? It would be cold and windy, and the rain would hiss upon the sluggish waters. An exposed boat as he had always understood, the dim figures huddled together, their eyes straining to the farther shore. He nodded, nodded, nodded—Millie, Christina . . . Mrs. Jenssen . . . a strange young man called Baxter whom he hated at sight and tried to push from the coach. The figure

changed to Tom Duncombe, swelling to an enormous size, swelling, ever swelling, filling the coach so that they were breathless, crushed . . . a sharp pricking awoke him to a consciousness of Lady Bell-Hall's hatpin and then, quite suddenly, to something else. The noise that he heard, not loud, but in some way penetrating beyond the rattle and mumble of the cab, was terrifying. Some one in great pain—grr—grr—grr—Ah! Ah!—grr—the noise compressed between the teeth and coming in little gasps of agony.

'What is it?' he said, in a whisper. 'Is that you, sir?' He could see very little, the afternoon light faint and green behind the rain-blurred panes, but the black figure of Duncombe was hunched up against the cab-corner.

'What is it? Oh, sir, what is it?'

Then very far away a voice came to him, the words faltering from clenched teeth.

'It's nothing. . . . Pain bad for a moment——'

'Shall I stop the cab, sir?'

'No, no. . . . Don't wake my—sister.'

The sound of agonising pain behind the words was like something quite inhuman, unearthly, coming from the ground beneath the cab.

Henry, trembling with sympathy and a blind eagerness to help, leant forward. Could he change seats? He had wished to sit with his back to the horse, but Duncombe had insisted on his present place.

'Please . . . can't I do something?'

'No . . . nothing. It will pass in a moment.'

A hand, trembling, came out and touched his, then suddenly clutched it, jumping from its weak quiver into a frantic grasp, almost crushing Henry's.

The hand was hot and damp. For the moment, in the contact with that trouble, the world seemed to stop—there was no sound, no movement—even the rain had withered away. . . . Then the hand trembled again, relaxed, withdrew.

Henry said nothing. He was shaking from head to foot.

Lady Bell-Hall awoke. 'Oh, where am I? Who's that? Is that the bell? . . .' Then very stiffly, 'Oh, I'm very sorry, Mr. Trenchard. I'm afraid I was dozing. Are we nearly there? Are you there, Charles?'

Very faintly the voice came back.

'Yes . . . another half-mile. We've passed Brantiscombe.'

'Really, this cab. I wonder what Mortimer's were doing, not sending us a taxi. On a day like this too.'

There was silence again. The cab bumped along. Henry could think of nothing but that agonising whisper. Only terrible suffering could have produced that and from such a man as Duncombe. The affection and devotion that had grown through these months was now redoubled. He would do anything for him, anything. Had he been tortured like this for months and had nobody known? Memories came back to him of hours in the library when Sir Charles had sat there, his face white, his eyes sternly staring. Perhaps then. . . . But surely some one knew? He moved impatiently, longing for this horrible journey to be ended. Then there were lights, a gate swung back, and they were jolting down between an avenue of trees. Soon the cab stopped with a jerk before a high grey stone building that stood in the half-light as a veiling

shadow for a high black doorway and broad sweeping white steps. Behind, in front, and on every side they were surrounded, it seemed, by dripping and sighing trees. Lady Bell-Hall climbed out with many little tweaks of dismay and difficulty, then Henry. He turned and caught one revealing vision of Sir Charles's face—white, drawn, and most strangely aged—as he stood under the yellow light from a hanging square lantern before moving into the house.

At once, standing in the hall, Henry loved the house. It seemed immediately to come towards him with a gesture of friendliness and sympathy. The hall was wide and high, with a deep stone fireplace and a dark oak staircase peering from the shadows. It was ill-lit ; the central lamp had been designed apparently to throw light only on the portrait of a young man in the dress of the early eighteenth century that hung over the fireplace. Under his portrait Henry read—' Charles Forest Duncombe—October 13th, 1745.'

An elderly, grave-looking woman stood there, and a young apple-cheeked footman to whom Moffatt was ' tee-heeing, tut-tutting ' in a supercilious whisper. Lady Bell-Hall recovered a little. ' Ah, there you are, Morgan. Quite well ? That's right. And we'll have tea in the Blue Room. It's very late because Mortimer never sent the taxi, but we'll have tea all the same. I must have tea. Take Pretty One, please, Morgan. Don't drop her. Ickle-Ickle-Ickle. Was it cold because we were in a nasty slow cab, was it, then ? There, then, darling. Morgan shall take her, then — kind Morgan. Yes, tea in the Blue Room, please.'

At last Henry was in his room, a place to which

he had come, as it seemed to him, through endless winding passages and up many corkscrew stairs. It was a queer-shaped little room with stone walls, a stone floor, and very narrow high windows. There was, of course, no fire, because in England we keep religiously to the seasons whatever the weather may be. The rain was driving heavily upon the window-panes, and some branches drove with irregular monotony against the glass. The furniture was of the simplest, and there was only one picture, an oil-painting over the fireplace, of a thin-faced, dark-browed, eighteenth-century priest, cadaverous, menacing, scornful.

Henry seemed to be miles away from any human company. Not a sound came to him save the rain and the driving branches. He washed his hands, brushed his hair, and prepared to find his way downstairs, but beside the door he paused. As he had fancied in the library in Hill Street, so now again it seemed to him that something was whispering to him, begging him for sympathy and understanding. He looked back to the little chill room, then up at the portrait of the priest, then to the window beyond which he could see the thin grey twilight changing to the rainy dark. He stood listening, then with a little shiver, half of pleasure, half of apprehension, he went out into the passage.

His journey, then, was full of surprises. The house was deserted. The passage in which he found himself was bordered with rooms, and after passing two or three doors he timidly opened one and peered in. In the dusk he could see but little; the air that met him was close and heavy, dust blew into his nostrils, and he could just discern a high four-poster bed. The floor was bare and

chill. Another room into which he looked was apparently quite empty. The passage was now very dark and he had no candle ; he stumbled along, knocking his elbow against the wall. ' They might have put me in a livelier part of the house,' he thought ; and yet he was not displeased, carrying still with him the sense that he was welcome here and not alone. In the dusk he nearly pitched forward over a sudden staircase, but finding an oak banister he felt his way cautiously downward. On the next floor he was faced with a large oak door, which would lead, he fancied, to the other part of the house. He pushed it slowly back and found himself in a chapel suffused with a dark purple light that fell from the stained-glass window above the altar.

He could see only dimly, but above the oaken seats he fancied that some tattered flags were hanging. Here the consciousness of sympathy that had been with him from the beginning grew stronger. Something seemed to be urging him to sit down there and wait. The air grew thicker, and the windows, seats, and walls were veiled in purple smoky mist. He crept out half-ashamedly as though he were deserting some one, found the stairs again, and a moment later was in a well-lit carpeted passage. With a sigh of relief he saw beyond him Moffatt and the footman carrying the tea.

He woke next day to an early morning flood of sunshine. His monastic little room with its stone walls and narrow windows swam in the light that sparkled, as though over water, above his faded blue carpet. He went to his window and looked out

on to a boxwood garden with a pleached alley that led to a pond, a statue, and a little green arbour. Beyond the garden there were woods, pale green, purple, black against the brightness of the early morning sky. Thousands of birds were singing, and the grass was intensely vivid after the rain of the day before, running in the far distance around the arbour like a newly painted green board.

The impression that the next week made was all of colour, light, and sunshine. That strange melancholy that had seemed to him to pervade everything on the night of his arrival was now altogether gone, although a certain touching, intangible wistfulness was present in everything that he saw and heard.

The house was much smaller than he had at first supposed—compact, square, resembling in many ways an old-fashioned doll's house. Duncombe told him that small as it was they had closed some of the rooms, and apologised to him for giving him a bedroom in the unfurnished portion. 'In reality,' he explained, 'that part of the house where you are is the brightest and most cheerful side. Our mother, to whom my sister was devotedly attached, died in the room next to yours, and my sister cannot bear to cross those passages.'

The little chapel was especially enchanting to Henry; the stained glass of the east window was most lovely, deep, rich, seeming to sink into the inmost depths of colour; it gave out shadows of purple and red and blue that he had never seen before. The three old flags that hung over the little choir were tattered and torn, but proud. All the rooms in the house were small, the ceilings low, the fireplaces deep and draughty.

Henry soon perceived that Duncombe loved this house with a passionate devotion. He seemed to become another man as he moved about in it, busied continually with tiny details, touching this, shifting that, having constant interviews with Spiders, the gardener, a large, furry-faced man, and old Moffatt, and Simon, the apple-cheeked footman ; an identity suddenly in its right place, satisfying its soul, knowing its true country as he had never seemed to do in London.

Henry saw no recurrence of the crisis in the cab. Duncombe made no allusion to it and gave no sign of pain—only Henry fancied that behind Duncombe's eyes he saw a foreboding consciousness of some terror lying in wait for him and ready to spring.

The room in which he worked was a little library, diminutive in comparison with the one in London, on the ground floor, looking out on to the garden with the statue of Cupid and the pond—a dear little room with old black-faced busts and high glass-fronted bookcases. He had brought a number of books down with him, and soon he had settled into the place as though he had been there all his life.

The interval of that bright, sunny, bird-haunted week seemed, when afterwards he looked back to it, like a pause given to him in which to prepare for the events that were even then crowding, grey-shaped, face-muffled, to his door. . . .

CHAPTER VII

AND PETER IN LONDON

The Third of the Company meanwhile was feeling lonely and deserted in London. London in August is really depressing in spite of its being the conventional habit to say so. Around every worker's brain there is a consciousness of the wires of captivity, and although the weather may be, and indeed generally is, cold, wet, and dark, nevertheless it is hard to doubt but that it is bright and shining by the sea and on the downs.

Peter could have gone into the country—nothing really held him to London—but he had in literal truth no one with whom to go. In the past he had not grumbled at having no friends ; that was after all his own choice—no one was to blame save himself—but during these last months something had happened to him. He was at length waking from a sleep that seemed to him as he looked back to have lasted ever since that terrible night that he had spent on the hill outside Treliss, the night of the day that Norah Monogue had died.

At last he was waking. What he had said to Millie was true—his interest in herself and Henry was the force that had stirred him—and stirred him now to what dangerous ends ?

One night early in August flung him suddenly at the truth.

Two of the Three Graces—Grace Talbot and Jane Ross—were at home to their friends in their upper part in Soho Square. Peter went because he could not endure another lonely evening in his rooms—another hour by himself and he would be forced to face the self-confession that now at every cost he must avoid. So he went out and found himself in the little low-ceilinged rooms, thick with smoke and loud with conversation.

Grace Talbot was looking very faint and languid, buried in a large armchair in the centre of the room with a number of men round her ; Jane Ross, plainer and more pasty than ever, was trying to be a genial hostess, and discovering, not for the first time, that a caustic tongue was more easily active than a kind heart. She wanted to be nice to every one, but, really, people *were* so absurd and so stupid *and* so slow. It wasn't her fault that she was so much cleverer than every one else. She didn't *want* to be. But there you were ; one can't help one's fate.

Peter was greeted by one or two, and settled down into a chair in a corner near a nice, fat, red-faced man called Amos Campbell. Campbell was a novelist who had once been of the Galleon school and full of Galleonish subtleties, and now was popular and Trollopian. He was, perhaps, a trifle over-pleased with himself and the world, a little too prosperous and jolly and optimistic, and being in addition the son of a Bishop, his voice at times rose to a pulpit ring, but he meant well, was vigorous and bland and kindly. The Graces thoroughly despised him, and Peter was astonished to see him

there. Perhaps Nister or Gale or one of the other men had brought him. He would have received no mention in this history had it not been for a conversation that he originated, a conversation that had important results both for Peter and Henry.

Literary parties were curious affairs in 1920; they shared the strange general character of that year in their confusion and formlessness. It was a fact that at that time in London there was not a single critical figure who commanded general respect. No school of criticism carried any authority outside its immediate following—not one man nor woman alive in Great Britain at that moment, not one literary journal, weekly, monthly, or daily, carried enough weight behind its literary judgements to shift for a moment the success or failure of a book or a personality. Monteith, whose untidy black hair and pale face Peter saw in the distance, had been expected to do great things, but as soon as he had commanded a literary weekly he had shown that he had no more breadth, nor wisdom, nor knowledge than the other men around him, and he had fallen quickly into the hands of a small clique who wrote for his paper in a happy spirit of mutual admiration. All this was nobody's fault—it was the note of a period that was far stronger in its character than any single human being in it.

Everything was in the whirlpool of change, and that little room to-night, with its smoke, furious conversation, aimless wandering of dim figures moving in and out of the haze, formed a very good symbol of the larger world outside.

Peter exchanged a few sentences with Campbell, then fell into silence. Suddenly the restraint that

he had been forcing upon himself for the last two months was relaxed. He would think of her. Why should he not? For five minutes. For five minutes. In that dim, smoke-obscured room who would know, who could tell, who could see her save himself?

She came towards him, smiling, laughing, suddenly springing up before him, her arms outstretched, bright in her orange jumper as she had been on that day in Henry's room; then her face changed, softened, gravity came into it; she was leaning towards him, listening to his story, her eyes were kindly, she stretched out her hand and touched his knee, he held out his arms. . . . O God! but he must not. She was not for him, she could not be. Even were he not already tied, what could he offer her with his solemnity and dreaminess? . . . He sprang up.

'Going already?' said Campbell. 'Had enough of it?'

'No. I want to speak to Monteith. Hullo, there's Seymour. Keep him off, Campbell. His self-satisfaction is more than I could endure just now.'

He sat down again and watched the figures, so curiously dim and unreal that it might be a world of ghosts.

'Ghosts? Perhaps we are. Anyway we soon will be.'

Jane Ross came stumping towards him. 'Oh, Mr. Westcott! Come and make yourself useful. There's Anna Makepeace over there, who wrote *Plum Bun*. You ought to know her.'

'I'm very happy where I am.' She stumped away, and, sitting back in his chair, he was suddenly

aware of Grace Talbot, who, although Monteith had come up and was talking very seriously, was staring in front of her, lost, many miles away, dreaming.

She was suddenly human to him, she who had been for the most part the drop of ink at the end of a cynical pen, the contemptuous flash of an arrogant eye, the languorous irony of a dismissing hand.

She was as unhappy as himself. Perceiving it suddenly, and her essential loneliness, he felt a warmth towards her that intensely surprised him. 'What children we all are!' he said to himself: 'the Graces, Hallard, the great Mr. Winch, the Parisian Mrs. Wanda, and all the rest of us! How little we know! What insecure, fumbling artists the best of us—and the only two great writers of our time are the humblest men amongst us. After all, *our* arrogance is necessary for us because we have failed, written so badly, travelled such a tiny way.'

An urgent longing for humility, generosity, humour, kindliness of heart, swept over him. He felt that at that moment he could love any one, however slow and conventional their brain, were their heart honest, generous, and large. He and Monteith and Grace Talbot were leading little hemmed-in lives, moving in little hemmed-in groups, talking in little hemmed-in phrases.

Like Henry a few months earlier, a revelation seemed to come to him that Life was the gate to Art, not Art to Life. He surely had been taught that lesson again and again, and yet he had not learnt it.

He was pulled out into the centre of the room by a sudden silence and a realisation that every one was listening to a heated argument between Monteith and Campbell. Grace Talbot was looking up from

her chair at the two men with her accustomed glance of lazy superiority.

Westcott was surprised at Campbell, who was a comfortable man, eager to be liked by every one, afraid therefore to risk controversy lest some one should be displeased, practised in saying the thing that his neighbour wished to hear.

But something on this occasion had become too strong for him and dragged him for once into a public declaration of faith, regardless whether he offended or no.

'You're all wrong, Monteith,' he burst out. 'You're all wrong. And I'll tell you why. I'm ten years older than you are, and ten years ago I might have thought as you do. Now I know better. You're wrong because you're arrogant, and you're arrogant because you're limited, and you're limited because you've surrounded yourself with smaller men who all think as you do. You've come to look on the world simply as one big field especially manured by God for the sowing of your own little particular seed. If other poor humans choose to beg for some of your seed you'll let them have it and give them permission to sow, but there's only one kind of seed, and you know what kind that is.

'Well, you're wrong. You've got a decent little plant that was stronger six years ago than it is now—but still not a bad little plant. You're fluent and clever and modern ; you're better than some of them, Grace Talbot here, for instance, because you *do* believe in the past and believe that it has some kind of connection with the present, but you've deliberately narrowed your talent *and* your influence by your arrogance. Arrogance,

Arrogance, Arrogance—that's the matter with all of you—and the matter with Literature and Art to-day, and politics too. You all think you've got the only recipe and that you've nothing to learn. You've *everything* to learn. Any ploughman in Devonshire to-day could teach you, only the trouble is that he's arrogant too now and thinks he knows everything because his Labour leaders tell him so.'

Campbell paused and Monteith struck in. Monteith, when he was studying at Cambridge the Arts of being a Public Man, had learnt that Rule No. 1 was—Never lose your temper in public unless the crowd is with you.

He remained, therefore, perfectly calm, simply scratching his hair and rubbing his bristly chin.

'Very good, Campbell. But aren't you being a little bit arrogant yourself? And quite right, too. You ought to be arrogant and I ought to be. We both imagine that we know something about literature. Well, why shouldn't we say what we know? What's the good of the blind leading the blind? Why should I pretend that I know as little as Mr. Snookes and Mr. Jenks? I know more than they. Why should I pretend that every halfpenny novelist who happens to be the fashion of the moment is worth attention? Why shouldn't I select the good work and praise it and leave the rest alone?'

'Yes,' said Campbell; 'what's good work by your over-sophisticated, over-read, over-intellectual standard. Well and good if you'll say, "I've trained myself in such and such a way and my opinions are these. My training, my surroundings, my own talent, my friends have all

persuaded me in this direction. There are other men, other works that may be good or bad. I don't know. About contemporary Art one can only be personal, never final. I have neither the universal temperament nor the universal training to be Judge. I can be Advocate, Special Pleader. I can show you something good that you haven't noticed before.

'"I am *not* God Almighty, nor do I come straight from Olympus. I have still a lot to learn."'

'If you'll forgive me saying so, Mr. Campbell,' said Jane Ross, 'you're talking the most arrant nonsense. You're doing your best to break down what a few of us are trying to restore—some kind of a literary standard. At last there's an attempt being made to praise good work and leave the fools alone.'

'And *I'm* one of the fools,' broke in Campbell. 'Oh, I know. But don't think there's personal feeling in this. There might have been ten years ago. I worried then a terrible deal about whether I were an artist or no; I cared what you people said, read your reviews, and was damnably puzzled by the different decisions you gave. And then suddenly I said to myself, "Why shouldn't I have some fun? Life's short. I'm not a great artist, and never shall be. I'll write to please myself." And I did. And I've been happy ever since. You're just as divided about me as you used to be. And just as divided about one another. The only difference is that you still worry about one another and fight and scratch, and I bow to your superior judgement—and enjoy myself. I haven't much of an intellect, I'm not a good critic, but I'm nearer real life than you are, any of you. What you people

are doing is not separating the sheep from the goats as you think you are—none of you are decided as to who the sheep really are—you are simply separating Life from Art. We're not an artistic nation—nothing will ever make us one. We've provided some of the greatest artists the world has ever seen because of our vitality and our independence of cliques. How much about Art did Richardson and Fielding, Scott and Jane Austen, Thackeray and Dickens, Trollope and Hardy consciously know? When has Hardy ever written one single statement about Art outside his own prefaces?—and in them he talks simply of his own books. But these men knew about Life. Fielding could tell you what the inside of a debtor's prison is like, and Scott could plant trees, and Thackeray was no mean judge of a shady crowd at a foreign watering-place, and Hardy knows all about milking a cow. What do you people know about anything save literary values?—and over them you squabble all the while. There aren't any literary values until Time has spoken. But there is such a thing as responding to the beauty in something that you've seen or read, and telling others that you've enjoyed it—and there are more things in this world to enjoy—even in the mess that it's in at this moment—than any of you people realise.'

Campbell stopped. Seymour, who was standing just behind him, saw fit to remark: 'How right you are, Campbell; Life's glorious, it seems to me. What was it Stevenson said? "Life is so full of a number of things."'

Poor Campbell! Nothing more terrible than Seymour's appreciation was to be found in the London of that period.

'Oh, damn!' Campbell muttered. 'I didn't see you were there, Seymour. Just my luck.'

But Peter had been watching Grace Talbot's eyes. She had not listened to a word of the little discussion. The cessation of voices pulled her back. 'You're a good fellow, Campbell,' she said. 'You've got a good digestion, a gift for narrative, very little intellect, and at fifty you'll be very fat and have purple veins in your nose. We all like you, but you really must forgive us for not taking you seriously.'

Campbell laughed. 'Perhaps you're right,' he said. 'But which is better? To be a second-rate artist and free or to be a second-rate artist and bound? Your little stories are very nice, Grace, but they aren't as good as either Tchekov or Maupassant. Monteith's poetry is clever, but it isn't as good as T. E. Brown on one side or Clough on the other, and neither T. E. Brown nor Clough was a first-rate poet. So can't we, all of us, second-raters as we are, afford to be generous to one another and take everything a little less solemnly? Life's passing, you know. Happiness and generosity are worth having.'

'We will now sing Hymn 313: "Onward, Christian Soldiers,"' said Jane Ross, laughing. 'Next Sunday being the Third after Trinity the sermon at Evensong will be preached by the Rev. Amos Campbell, Rector of Little Marrow Pumpernickel. He will take as his text "Blessed are the Meek for they shall inherit the earth." The Collection will be for Church Expenses.'

Every one laughed, but Grace Talbot moved restlessly in her chair.

'All the same,' she said, 'Amos is right in a

way. Why the devil don't we write better? I wish—I wish——' But nobody knew what she wished, because the great Mr. Winch arrived at that moment and demanded attention.

Peter walked home to his Marylebone rooms in a fine confusion of thought and feeling. Campbell was a bit of a fool, too fat, too prosperous, too anxious to be popular, but he was a happy man, and a man who was living his life at its very fullest. He was not a great artist, of course—great artists were never happy—but he had a narrative gift that it amused him to play with every morning of his life from ten to twelve, and he made money from that gift and could buy books and pictures and occasionally do a friend a good turn. Monteith and Grace Talbot and the others were more serious artists and were more seriously considered, but their gifts came to mighty little in the end—thin, thin, little streams. As to Peter his gift came simply to nothing at all. And yet he did not wish to be Campbell. Too much prosperity was bad, and Campbell in the 'slippered pantaloon' age, when it came to him, would be unpleasant to behold. *His* enchantment was very different from Millie's and Henry's, bless them. At the thought of them there came such a longing for them, for their physical presence, their cheery voices, their laughter and noise, that he could scarcely endure his loneliness. *Theirs* was the Age. *Theirs* the Kingdom, the Power, and the Glory.

And why should he not long for Millie? For the second time that evening he abandoned himself to the thought of her. As he walked down Oxford Street, pearl-grey under sheeted stars, he conjured

her to his side, put his arm about her, bent down and raised her face to his, kissed her. . . . Why should he not? He was married. But that was such years ago. Was he to be cursed for ever because of that early mistake?

Maybe Clare was dead. He would go off to France to-morrow and make another search. Now when real love had come to him at last he would not be cheated any more. Life was passing. In a few years it would be too late. His agonised longing for Millie seized him so that he stood for a moment outside the shuttered windows of Selfridge's, frozen into immobility by the power of his desire.

At least he could be her friend—her friend who would run to the world's end for her if she wished it; to be her friend and to write as Campbell had said simply for his own fun—after all, he was getting something out of life in that; to go on and see this new world developing in *her* eyes, to help *her* to get the best out of it, to live for the young generation through *her*. . . . So strong was his desire that he really believed for a moment that she was by his side. . . .

'Millie,' he whispered. When in his rooms he switched on the light he found on his table two letters; he saw at once that one was in Millie's handwriting. Eagerly he tore it open. He read it:

METROPOLITAN HOTEL, CLADGATE.

MY DEAR PETER—I feel that you must be the next human being after Henry to hear a piece of news that has made me very happy. I am engaged—to a man called Baxter. I met him first at Miss Platt's and fell in love with him at first sight. I do hope you'll like him. I'm sure you will. I've told him about you, and he says he's afraid of you because you sound so clever. He's clever too in his

own way, but it isn't books. I'm *so* happy, and it does seem so selfish when the world is in such a mess and so many people are hard up. But this only happens once !

I do want you to meet Bunny (that's Baxter) as soon as ever you can.—Your affectionate friend,

MILLICENT TRENCHARD.

When Peter had finished the letter he switched off the light and sat on, staring at the blue-faced window-pane.

BOOK III

FIRST BRUSH WITH THE ENEMY

CHAPTER I

ROMANCE AT CLADGATE

'You ought to have told me about it before, dear,' said Victoria. 'You knew how simply *thrilled* I'd be.'

Millie and Victoria were sitting in low chairs near the band. In front of them was the sea walk along whose grassy surface people passed and repassed—beyond the grass a glittering, sparkling sea of blue and gold; above their heads a sky of stainless colour. In rows to right and left of them serried ranks of deck-chairs were packed together, and every chair contained a more-or-less human being. The band could be heard now rising above the chatter, now falling out of sight altogether as though the bandsmen were plunged two or three times a minute into a deep pit, there to cool and reflect a little before swinging up again.

It was so hot and glittering a day that every one was happy—hysterically so, perhaps, because the rain was certain to return, so that they were an army holding a fort that they knew they were not strong enough to defend for long. There were boats like butterflies on the sea, and every once and again an aeroplane throbbed above the heads of the visitors

and reminded them that they were living in the twentieth century.

Millie, who adored the sun and was in the nature of things almost terribly happy, drew the eyes of every passer-by towards her. She was conscious of this as she was conscious of her health, her happiness, her supreme confidence in eternal benevolence, her charity to all the world. Victoria had been, before Millie made her confession, in a state of delight with her clothes, her hat, her parasol, her publicity, and her digestion. Millie's news threw her into an oddly confused state of delight, trepidation, and self-importance. She thrilled to the knowledge that there was a wonderful romance going on at her very side, but it would mean, perhaps, that she would lose Millie, and she thought it, on the whole, rather impertinent of Mr. Baxter. It hurt her, too, that this should have existed for weeks at her side and that she should have noticed nothing of it.

'Oh, my Millie, you should have told me!' she cried.

'I would have told you at once,' said Millie, 'but Bunny wanted us to be quiet about it for a week or two, until his mother returned from Scotland.'

'But you could have told me,' continued Victoria. 'I'm so safe and never tell *anything*. And why should Mr. Baxter keep it quiet as though he were ashamed of it?'

'I know,' said Millie. 'I didn't want him to. I hate secrecy and plots and mysteries. And so I told him. But it was only for a week or two. And his mother comes down from Scotland on Friday.'

'Well, I hope it will be a long engagement,

darling, so that you may be quite sure before you do it. I remember a cousin of ours meeting a girl at tea in our house, proposing to her before he'd had his second cup, marrying her next morning at a registry office, and separating from her a week later. He took to drink after that and married his cook, and now he has ten children and not a penny.'

The music rose into a triumphant proclamation of Sir William Gilbert's lyric concerning 'Captain Shaw,' and Victoria discovered two friends of hers from the hotel, sitting quite close to her and very friendly indeed.

Although they had been at Cladgate so short a time Victoria had acquired a large and various circle of new acquaintances, a circle very different indeed from the one that filled the house in Cromwell Road. Millie was amused to see how swiftly Victoria's wealth enabled her to change from one type of human to another. No New Art in Cladgate! No, indeed. Mostly very charming, warm-hearted people with no nonsense about them. Millie also perceived that so soon as any human creature floated into the atmosphere of Victoria's money it changed like a chameleon. However ungrasping and unacquisitive it may have hitherto been, the consciousness that now with a little gush and patience it might obtain something for nothing had an astonishing effect.

All Victoria desired was to be loved, and by as many people as possible. Within a week the whole of visiting Cladgate adored her. It adored her so much that it was willing to eat her food, sit in her car, allow itself to be taken to the theatre free of expense, and make little suggestions about possible gifts that would be gratefully received.

All that was requested of it in return was that it should praise Victoria to her face and allow her to exercise her power of command.

Millie did not think the worse of human nature for this. She perceived that in these strange times, when prices were so high and incomes so low, any one would do anything for money. A certain Captain Blatt—a cheerful gentleman of any age from thirty to fifty—was quite frank with her about it. 'I was quite a moral man before the war, Miss Trenchard. I was, I assure you. Stockbroking in the City and making enough to have a good time. Now I'm making nothing—and I would do anything for money. *Anything*. Let some one offer me a thousand pounds down and I will sell my soul for three months. One must exist, you know.'

Victoria's happiness was touching to behold. The Blocks, the Balaclavas and the rest were entirely forgotten. Millie had hoped, at first, that she might do something towards stemming this new tide of hungry ones. But after a warning or two she saw that she was powerless. 'Why, Millie,' cried Victoria, 'you're becoming a cynic. You suspect every one. I'm sure Mrs. Norman is perfectly sweet, and it's too adorable of her to want me to be godmother to her new darling baby. And poor Mr. Hackett! With his brother consumptive at Davos and depending entirely upon him and his old mother nearly ninety, and his business all gone to pieces because of the war, of course I must help him. What's my money for?'

Meanwhile this same money poured forth like water. Would it one day be exhausted? Millie wrote to Dr. Brooker and asked him to keep a watch. 'She's quite hopeless just now,' she wrote,

'but we're only here for another three weeks. I suppose we must let her have her fun while she can.'

Nevertheless it was upon this same beautiful afternoon that she realised a more sinister and personally dangerous effect of Victoria's generosity. She was sitting back in her chair, almost asleep. The world came as a coloured murmur to her, the faint rhythm of the band, the soft blue of sea and sky, the sharp note of Victoria's voice—'Oh, really!' 'Fancy indeed!' 'Just think!' The warmth upon her body was like an encircling arm caressing her very gently with the little breeze that was its voice. She seemed to swing out to sea and back again, lazily, lazily, too happy, too sleepy to think, fading into unreality, into nothing but colour, soft blue swathes of colour wrapping her round. . . . Then suddenly, with a sharp outline like a black pencil drawing against a white background, she saw Bunny.

Beautifully dressed in white flannels, a straw hat pushed back a little from his forehead, he stood, some way down the green path, half-turned in her direction, searching amongst the chairs.

She noticed all the things about him that she loved—his neatness, his slim body, his dark eyes, sunburnt forehead, black moustache, his mouth even then unconsciously half-smiling, his breeding, his self-confidence.

'Ah! how I love him!' and still swaying out to sea she, from that blue distance, could adore him without fear that he would hold her cheap.

'I love him, I love him—' Then from the very heart of the blue, sharply like the burst of a cracker in her ear, a sound snapped—'Look out! Look out! There's danger here!'

The sound was so sharp that as one does after some terrifying nightmare she awoke with a clap of consciousness, sitting up in her chair bewildered. Had some one spoken? Had an aeroplane swooped suddenly down? Had she really slept? Everything now was close upon her, pressing her in—the metallic clash of the band, the voices, the brush of incessant footsteps upon the grass, and Bunny was coming towards her now, smiling, his eyes lit. . . . Had some one spoken?

Greetings were exchanged. Victoria could not say very much. She could only press his hand and murmur, 'I'm so glad—Millie has told me. Bless you both!'

He smiled, was embarrassed, and carried Millie off for a walk. As soon as they had gone a little way he burst out, 'Oh, Mill, why *did* you? I asked you not to.'

'I couldn't help it. I warned you that I hate concealment. I'm very sorry, Bunny, but I can't keep it secret any longer.'

She looked up and saw to her amazement that he was angry. His face was puckered and he looked ten years older.

'Have you told any one else?'

'Only my mother and a great friend.'

'Friend? What friend?'

'A great friend of Henry's—yes, and of mine too,' she burst out laughing. 'You needn't worry, Bunny. He's a dear old thing, but he's well over forty, and I've never been in the least in love with him.'

'He is with you, I suppose?'

Strangely his words made her heart beat a little faster. Strange because what did she care whether

Peter were in love with her or no? And yet—it was nice, even now when she was swallowed up by her love for Bunny, it was pleasant to think that Peter did care—cared a little.

'Oh, he looks on me and Henry as in the schoolroom still.'

'Then why did you tell him about us?'

'I don't know. What does it matter?'

'It matters just this much—that I asked you not to tell anybody and you've told every one in sight.'

'Well, I'm like that. I did keep it for three or four weeks, but I hate being deceitful. I'm proud of you and proud of your caring for me. I want people to know. Of course if there were any *real* reason for keeping it secret——'

'There *is* a real reason. I told you. My mother——'

'She's coming back on Friday, so it doesn't matter now, telling people.'

'But it *does* matter. People talk so.'

'But why shouldn't they talk? There's nothing to be ashamed of in our being engaged.'

He said nothing, and they walked along in an uncomfortable silence. Then she turned to him, putting her hand through his arm.

'Now look here, Bunny. We're not going to have a quarrel. And if we *are* going to have a quarrel, I must know what it's about. Everything *must* be straight between us, always. I can't *bear* your not telling me what you're thinking. I'm sensible, I can stand anything if you'll only tell me. Is there any other reason besides your mother why you don't want people to know that we're engaged?'

'No, of course not—only. . . . Well, it looks so silly seeing that we have no money and——'

'What does it matter what people say? We know, you and I, that you're going to have a job soon. We can manage on very little at first——'

'It isn't that—' He suddenly smiled, looking young and happy again. He pressed her arm against his side. 'Look here, Millie—as you've let the cat out of the bag, the least you can do is to help about the money side of things.'

'Help? Of course I will.'

'Well, then—why not work old Victoria for a trifle? She's rolling in wealth, and just chucks it round on all sorts of rotten people who don't care about her a damn. She's devoted to you. I'm sure she'd settle something on us if you asked her.'

Millie stared at him.

'Live on Victoria! Ask her for money? Oh, Bunny! I couldn't——'

'Why not? Every one does — people who aren't half as fond of her as you are.'

'Ask her to support us when we're young and— Bunny, what an awful idea. Please——'

'Rot! Sometimes I think, Millie, you've lived in a wood all your days. Every one does it these times. We're all pirates. She's got more than she knows what to do with—we haven't any. She likes you better than any one. You've been working for her like a slave.'

Millie moved away a little.

'You can put that out of your head, Bunny—once and for all. I shall never ask Victoria for a penny.'

'If you don't, I will.'

'If you do, I'll never speak to you again.'

'Very well, then, don't.' Before she could answer he had turned and was walking rapidly away, his head up, his shoulders set.

Instantly misery swooped down upon her like an evil, monstrous bird that covered the sky, blotting out the sun with its black wings. Misery and incomprehension! So swiftly had the world changed that when the familiar figures—the men and the women so casual and uncaring—came back to her vision they had no reality to her, but were like fragments of coloured glass shaking in and out of a kaleidoscope pattern. She was soon sitting beside Victoria again.

She said, 'Why, dear, where is Mr. Baxter?'

And Millie said, 'He had to go back to the hotel for something.'

But Victoria just now was frying other fish. She had at her side Angela Compton, her newest and greatest friend. She had known Angela for a week, and Angela had, she said, given a new impulse to her life. Miss Compton was a slim woman with black hair, very black eyebrows and red cheeks. Her features seemed to be painted on wood, and her limbs, too, moved jerkily to support the doll-like illusion. But she was not a doll; oh dear, no, far from it! In their first half-hour together she told Millie that what she lived for was adventures—'And I have them!' she cried, her black eyes flashing. 'I have them all the time. It is an extraordinary thing that I can't move a yard without them.' It was her desire to be the centre of every party, and thoroughly to attain this enviable position she was forced, so Millie very quickly suspected, to invent tales and anecdotes when the naked truth failed her. She had been to Cladgate on several other summers and was able, therefore, to bristle with personal anecdotes. 'Do you see that man over there?' she would deliciously

whisper. 'The one with the high collar and the side-whiskers. He looks as though butter wouldn't melt in his mouth, but one evening last summer as I was coming in——' or 'That girl! My dear. . . . Drugs—oh! I know it for a fact. Terribly sad, isn't it? But I happen to have seen——'

All these tales she told with the most innocent intentions in the world, being one, as she often assured her friends, who wouldn't hurt a fly. Victoria believed every word that fell from her lips, and adored to believe.

To-day she was the greatest comfort to Millie. She could sit there in her misery and gather around her Angela's little scandals as protection.

'Oh, but it can't be!' Victoria would cry, her eyes shining.

'Oh, of course, if you don't want to believe me! I saw him staring at me days before. At last he spoke to me. We were quite alone at the moment, and I said: "Really I'm very sorry, but I don't know you."

'"Give me just five minutes," he begged, "that's all I ask. If you knew what it would mean to me." And I, knowing all the time, my dear, about the awful things he'd been doing to his wife —I let him go on for a little while, and then very quietly I said——'

Milly stared in front of her. The impulse that she was fighting was to run after him, to find him anywhere, anywhere, to tell him that she was sorry, that it had been her fault . . . just to have his hand in hers again, to see his eyes kindly, affectionate, never, never again that fierce hostility as though he hated her and were a stranger to her, another man whom she did not know and had never seen before.

'Of course I don't blame him for drinking. After all, there have been plenty of people before now who have found that too much for them, but before everybody like that! All I know is that his brother-in-law came up (mind you, this is all in the strictest confidence) and said before every one——'

But why should she go to him? He had been in the wrong. That *he* should be like the others and want to plunder Victoria, poor Victoria whom she was always defending. . . .

The band played 'God Save the King.' Slowly they all walked towards the hotel.

'Yes, that's the woman I mean,' said Miss Compton. 'Over there in the toque. You wouldn't think it to look at her, would you? But I assure you——'

Millie crept like a wounded bird into the hotel. He was waiting for her. He dragged her into a corner behind a palm.

'Millie, I didn't mean it—I don't know what I was about. Forgive me, darling. You must, you must. . . . I'm a brute, a cad. . . .'

Forgive him? Happiness returned in warm floods of light and colour. Happiness. But even as he kissed her it was not, she knew, happiness of quite the old kind—no, not quite.

Ellen was coming. Very soon. In two days. Millie did not know why it was that she should tremble apprehensively. She was not one to tremble before anything, but it was an honest fact that she was more truly frightened of Ellen than of any one she had ever met. There was something in Ellen that frightened her, something secret and hidden.

Then of course Ellen would be nasty about Bunny. She had been already nasty about him, but she had not been aware then of the engagement. And in some strange way Millie was more afraid now of what Ellen would say about Bunny than she had been before that little quarrel of a day or two ago.

Millie, in spite of herself, thought of that little quarrel. Of course all lovers must have quarrels—quarrels were the means by which lovers came to know one another better—but he should not have gone off like that, should not have hurt her. . . . She could not as she would wish declare it to have been all her own fault. Well, then, Bunny was not perfect. Who had ever said that he was? Who *was* perfect when you came to that? Millie herself was far from perfect. But she wanted him to be honest. At that stage in her development she rated honesty very high among the virtues—not unpleasant, stupid, so-called honesty, where you told your friends frankly what you thought of them for your own pleasure and certainly not theirs, but honesty among friends so that you knew exactly where you were. It was not honest of Bunny to be nice to Victoria in order to get money out of her—but Millie was beginning to perceive that Victoria, good, kind, and foolish as she was, was a kind of plague-spot in the world, infecting every one who came near her. Even Millie herself . . . ?

And with this half-formed criticism of Bunny there came most curiously a more urgent physical longing for him. Before, when he had seemed so utterly perfect, the holding of hands, kisses, embraces could wait. Everything was so safe. But now *was* everything so safe? If they could quarrel like that at a moment's notice, and he could look suddenly

as though he hated her, were they so safe? Bunny himself was changing a little. He was always wanting to kiss her, to lead her into dark corners, to tell her over and over again that he adored her. Their love in these last days had lost some fine quality of sobriety and restraint that it had possessed at first.

There was something in the air of Cladgate with its brass bands, its over-dressed women, its bridge, and its dancing.

It is not to be supposed, however, that Millie worried herself very much. Only dimly behind her the sky had changed, thickening ever so slightly. Her sense of enchantment was not pierced.

Ellen arrived and was too sweet for any words.

In a letter to Henry, Millie wrote:

. . and do you ever feel, I wonder, that our paths are crossing all the time? It is, I suppose, because we have always been so much together and have done everything together. But I see everything so vividly that it is exactly as though I had been there—Duncombe and the thick woods and the little chapel and the deserted rooms and the boxwood garden. All this here is the very opposite, of course, and yet simply the other half of a necessary whole perhaps. Aren't I getting philosophical? Only I should hate to think that all that you are sharing in now is going out of the world and all this ugliness of mine remains. But of course it won't, and it's up to us, Henry, to see that it doesn't.

Meanwhile Ellen has arrived and is at present like one of those sugar mice that you buy at the toy-shop—simply too sweet for words. Poor thing, all she needs is some one to love her passionately, and she'll never, never get it. She's quite ready to love some one else passionately and to snatch what she can out of that, but she isn't made for passion—she's so bony and angular and suspicious, and is angry so easily.

I begged Victoria not to say anything about the engagement at present and she hasn't, although it hurts her terribly to keep it in. *Is*n't it silly to be afraid of Ellen? But I do so *hate* scenes. So many people seem to like them. Mother cured *us* of wanting them.

I'm dancing my legs off. Yesterday, I'm ashamed to say, I danced all a lovely afternoon. The Syncopated Orchestra here is heavenly, and Bunny says I one-step better than any one he's ever known.

Meanwhile, under the dancing and the eating and the dressing-up, there's the strangest feeling of unrest. Yesterday there was a Bolshevik meeting near the bandstand. Luckily there was a football match (very important—Cladgate *v.* Margate) and all the supposed Bolshies went to that instead. Aren't we a funny country? Victoria's very happy, dressing and undressing, taking people out in the car and buying things she doesn't want. She plays bridge very badly and was showing signs of interest in Spiritualism. They have séances in the hotel every night, and Victoria went to one last evening and was fortunately frightened out of her life. Some one put a hand on her bare shoulder, and she made such a fuss that they had to break up the séance. Give my love to Peter if you see him. He wrote me a sweet little letter about the engagement. . . .

That which Millie had said about her consciousness of Henry's world was very true. It seemed to her that his life and experience was always intermingling with hers, and one could not possibly be complete without the other. Now, for instance, Ellen was the connecting link. Ellen, one could see at once, did not belong to Cladgate, with its materialism, snobbery, and self-satisfaction. Cross old maid though you might call her, she had power and she had passion; moreover she was restless, in search of something that she would never find, perhaps, but the search was the thing. That was Henry's world—dear, pathetic, stumbling Henry,

with his fairy Princess straight out of Hans Andersen, and the wicked witch and the cottage built of sugar—all this, as Millie felt assured, to vanish with the crowing of the cock, but to leave Henry (and here was what truly distinguished him from his fellows) with his vision captured, the vision that was more important than the reality. Ellen was one of the midway figures (and the world has many of them, discontented, aspiring, frustrated) who serve to join the Dream and the Business.

Unhappy they may be, but they have their important use and are not the least valuable part of God's creation. See Ellen in her black, rather dingy frock striding about the corridors of the Cladgate hotel, and you were made uncomfortably to think of things that you would rather forget.

During her first days she was delighted with Cladgate and everything and everybody in it. Then the rain came back and danced upon the glass roofs, and jazz bands screamed from floor to floor, and every one sat under the palms in pairs. There was no one to sit with Ellen; she did not play bridge, she did not dance. She was left alone. Millie tried to be kind to her when she remembered, but it was Ellen's fate to be forgotten.

One evening, just as Millie was going to bed, Ellen came into her room. She stood by the door glowering.

'I'm going back to London to-morrow,' she announced.

'Oh, Ellen, why? I thought you were enjoying yourself so much.'

'I'm miserable here. Nobody wants me.'

'Oh, but you're wrong. I——'

She strode across to Millie's dressing-table.

'No, you don't. Don't lie about it. Do you think I haven't eyes?'

Suddenly she sank on to the floor, burying her head in Millie's lap, bursting into desperate crying.

'Oh, I'm so lonely—so miserable. Why did I ever come here? Nobody wants me. They'd rather I was dead. . . . They say work—find work, they say. What are you doing thinking about love with your plain face and ugly body? This is the Twentieth Century, they say, the time for women like you. Every woman's free now. Free? How am I free? Work? What work can I do? I was never trained to anything. I can't even write letters decently. When I work the others laugh at me—I'm so slow. I want some one to love—some one, something. I can't keep even a dog because Victoria doesn't like dogs. . . . Millie, be kind to me a little—let me love you a little, do things for you, run messages, anything. You're so beautiful. Every one loves you. Give me a little. . . .'

Millie comforted her as best she might. She stroked her hair and kissed her, petted her, but, as before, in her youth and confidence she felt some contempt for Ellen.

'Get up,' she whispered. 'Ellen, dear, don't kneel like that. Please. . . . Please.'

Ellen got up.

'You do your best. You want to be kind. But you're young. You can't understand. One day, perhaps, you'll know better,' and she went away.

Was it Ellen or the daily life of Cladgate that was beginning to throttle Millie? She should have been so happy, but now a cloud had come. She suddenly distrusted life, hearing whispers down

the corridors, seeing heads close together, murmurs under that horrible, hateful band-music. . . .

Why was every one conspiring towards ugliness? On a beautiful morning, after a night of bad and disturbed dreams, she awoke very early, and going down to the pebbled beach below the hotel she was amazed by the beauty on every side of her. The sea turned lazily over like a cat in the sun, purring, asking for its back to be scratched; a veil of blue mist hung from earth to heaven; the grey sea-wall, at midday so hard and grim, was softly purple; the long grass sward above her head sparkling in the dew was unsoiled by the touch of any human being; no sound at all save suddenly a white bird rising, floating like a sigh, outlined against the blue like a wave let loose into mid-air—and the sea stroking the pebbles for love of their gleaming smiles.

She sat under the sea-wall longing for Bunny to be there, clutching her love with both hands and holding it out like a crystal bowl to the sea and air for them also to enjoy.

She had a perfect hour and returned to the hotel.

Then Ellen discovered. She faced Millie in Victoria's sitting-room, her face graven and moulded like a mask.

'So you're engaged to him after all?'

'Yes. I would have told you before only I knew that you wouldn't like it——'

'Wouldn't like it?' With a short, 'What does it matter what I like? All the same you've been kind to me once or twice, and for that I'm not going to see you ruining your life without making an effort.'

Millie flushed. She felt her anger rising as she had known that it would do. Foreseeing this scene she had told herself again and again that she must keep her temper when it arrived—above all things keep her temper.

'Now, Ellen, please don't. I know that you don't like him, but remember that it's settled now for good or bad. I'm very sorry that you don't like him better, but when you know him——'

'Know him! Know him! As though I didn't. But I won't let it pass. Even though you never speak to me again I'll force such evidence under your nose that you'll *have* to realise. Lord! the fools we women are! We talk of character and the things we say we admire, and we don't admire them a bit. What we want is decent legs and a smooth mouth and soft hands. I thought you had some sense, a little wisdom, but you're younger than any of us—I despise you, Millie, for this.'

Millie jumped up from the table where she had been writing.

'And what do I care, Ellen, whether you do despise me? Who are you to come and lecture me? I've had enough of your ill-temper and your scenes and all the rest of it. I don't want your friendship. Go your own way and let me go mine.'

Within her a voice was saying, 'You'll be sorry for this afterwards. You know you will. You like Ellen. You don't want to hurt her. You told me you were not going to lose your temper.'

Ellen tarried by the door. 'You can say what you like to me, Millie. I'll save you from this however much you hate me for it.' She went out.

'I despise you, Millie, for this.' The words rang in Millie's head as she sat there alone, repeated

themselves against her will. Well, what did it matter if Ellen *did* despise her? Yes, it did matter. She had been laughing at Ellen all these weeks, and yet she cared for her good opinion. Her vanity was wounded. She was little and mean and small.

And behind that there was something else. There had been more than anger and outraged sentiment in Ellen's attitude. She had meant what she said. She had something serious in her mind about Bunny—something that she thought she knew . . . something. . . .

'I'm contemptible!' Millie cried, 'losing my temper with Ellen like a fishwife, then distrusting Bunny. I'm worthless.' She wanted to run after Ellen and beg her pardon, but pride restrained her. Instead she was cross with Victoria all the morning.

Victoria's affairs were especially agitating to herself at this time and made her uncertain in her temper and easily upset. Out of the mist in which her many admirers obscurely floated two figures had risen who were quite obviously suitors for her hand. When Millie had first begun to perceive this she doubted the evidence of her observation. It could not be possible that any one should want to marry Victoria, stout and middle-aged as she was. But on second thoughts it seemed quite the simple natural thing for any adventurer to attempt. There was Victoria's money, with which she quite obviously did not know what to do. Why should not some one for whom youth was over, whose income was an uncertain quantity, decide to spend it for her?

Millie called both these men adventurers. There she was unjust. Major Miles Mereward was no adventurer; he was simply an honest soldier really

attracted by Victoria. Honest, but Lord, how dull!

As he sat in Victoria's room, the chair creaking beneath his fat body, his red hair rough and unbrushed, his red moustache untrimmed, his red hands clutching his old grey soft hat, he was the most uncomfortable, awkward, silent man Millie had ever met. He had nothing to say at all; he would only stare at Victoria, give utterance to strange guttural noises that were negatives and affirmatives almost unborn. He was poor, but he was honest. He thought Victoria the most marvellous creature in the world with her gay talk and light colour. He scarcely realised that she had any money. Far otherwise his rival Robin Bennett.

Mr. Bennett was a man of over forty, one who might be the grandson of Byron or a town's favourite 'Hamlet'—'Distinguished' was the word always used about him.

He dressed beautifully; he moved, Victoria declared, 'like a picture.' Not only this; he was able to talk with easy fluency upon every possible subject—politics, music, literature, painting, he had his hand upon them all. Moreover, he was adaptable. He understood just why Victoria preferred the novels she did, and he was not superior to her because of her taste. He knew why tears filled her eyes when the band played 'Pomp and Circumstance,' and thought it quite natural that on such an occasion she should want, as she said, 'to run out and give sixpences to all the poor children in the place.' He did not pretend to her that her bridge-playing was good. That indeed was more than even his arts could encompass, but

he did assure her that she was making progress with every game she played. He even tempted her in the ballroom of the hotel into the One-Step and the Fox-Trot, and an amusing sight for every one it was to see Victoria's flushed and clumsy efforts.

Nevertheless, it was obvious to the meanest intelligence that the man was an adventurer. Every one in the hotel knew it—Victoria was his third target that season ; even Victoria did not disguise it altogether from herself.

It was here that Millie found her touching and appealing. Millie realised that this was the very first time in Victoria's life that any one had made love to her ; that it was her money to which Bennett was making love seemed at the moment to matter very little. The woman was knowing, at long last, what it meant to have eyes—fine, large, brown eyes—gazing into hers, what it was to have her lightest word listened to with serious attention, what it was that some one should hasten to open the door, to push forward a chair for her, to pick up her handkerchief when she dropped it (a thing that she was always now doing). Mereward did none of these things for her—his brain moved too slowly to make the race a fair one. He was beaten by Bennett (who deeply despised him) every time.

But Victoria was only half a fool. 'Millie mine,' she said, 'don't you find Major Mereward very restful ? He's a *good* man.'

'He is indeed,' said Millie.

'Of course he hasn't Mr. Bennett's brains. I said to Mr. Bennett last night, "I can't think how it is with your brilliance that you are not in the Cabinet." '

'And what did Mr. Bennett say?' asked Millie.

'Oh, that he had never cared about politics, that it wasn't a gentleman's game any longer—in which I'm sure he's quite right. It seems a pity though. With his beautiful voice and fine carriage he might have done anything. He says his lack of means has always kept him back.'

'I expect it has,' said Millie.

She was, however, able to give only half a glance towards Victoria's interesting problem because of the increasing difficulty and unexpectedness of her own.

From the very first, long before he had spoken to her on that morning in the Cromwell Road, she had made with her hands a figure of fair and lovely report. It might be true that also from the very first she had seen that Bunny, like Roderick Hudson, 'evidently had a native relish for rich accessories, and appropriated what came to his hand,' or, like the young man in Galleon's *Widow's Comedy*, 'believed that the glories of the world were by right divine his own natural property'—all this she had seen and it had but dressed the figure with the finer colour and glow. Bunny was handsome enough and clever enough and bright enough to carry off the accessories as many a more dingy mortal might not do. And so, having set up her figure, she proceeded to deck it with every little treasure and ornament that she could find. All the little kindnesses, the unselfish thoughts, the sudden impulses of affection, the thanks and the promises and the ardours she collected and arranged. At first there had been many of these; when Bunny was happy and things went well with him he was kind and generous.

Then—and especially since the little quarrel about Victoria's money—these occasions were less frequent. It seemed that he was wanting something—something that he was in a hurry to get—and that he had not time now for little pleasantries and courtesies. His affection was not less ardent than it had been—it grew indeed with every hour more fierce—but Millie knew that he was hurrying her into insecure country and that she should not go with him and that she could not stop.

The whole situation now was unsatisfactory. His mother had been in London for some days, but Bunny said nothing of going to see her. Millie was obliged to face the fact that he did not wish to tell his mother of their engagement. Every morning when she woke she told herself that to-day she would force it all into the daylight, would issue ultimatums and stand by them, but when she met him, fear of some horrible crisis held her back—'Another day—let me have another lovely day. I will speak to him to-morrow.'

She who had always been so proud and fearless was now full of fear. She knew that when he was not thwarted he was still charming, ardent, affectionate, her lover—and so she did not thwart him.

Nothing had yet occurred that was of serious moment, the things about which they differed were little things, and she let them go by. He was always telling her of her beauty, and for the first time in her life she knew that she was beautiful. Her beauty grew amazingly during those weeks. She carried herself nobly, her head high, her mouth a little ironical, her eyes sparkling with the pleasure of life and the vigour of perfect health, knowing

that all the hotel world, and indeed all Cladgate, was watching her and paying tribute to her beauty.

No one disputed that she was the most beautiful girl in Cladgate that summer. She roused no jealousy. She was too young, too simple, too natural, and too kindly-hearted.

All the world could very quickly see that she was absorbed by young Baxter and had no thoughts for any one but him. She had no desire to snatch other young men from their triumphant but fighting captors. She was of a true, generous heart ; she would do any one a good turn, laugh with any one, play with any one, sympathise with any one.

She was not only the most beautiful, she was also the best-liked girl in the place.

Perhaps because of her retired, cloistered, Trenchard upbringing she was, in spite of two years finishing in Paris, innocent and pure of heart. She thought that she knew everything about life, and her courage and her frankness carried her through many situations before which less unsophisticated women would have quailed.

It was not that she credited every one with noble characters ; she thought many people foolish and weak and sentimental, but she did believe that every one was fundamentally good at heart and intended to make of life a fine thing. Her close companionship with Bunny caused her for the first time to wonder whether there was not another world—' underground somewhere '—of which she knew nothing whatever. It was not that he told her anything or introduced her to men who would tell her. He had, one must in charity to him believe, at this time at any rate, a real desire to respect her innocence ; but always behind the things they

did and said was this implication that he knew so much more of life than she. Henry had often implied that same knowledge, but she laughed at him. He might know things that he would not tell her, but he was essentially, absolutely of her own world. But Bunny *was* different. She was a modern girl, belonging to the generation in which, at last, women were to know as much, to see as much, as men. She *must* know.

'What do you *mean*, Bunny?'

'Oh, nothing . . . nothing that you need know.'

'But I want to know. I'm not a child——'

'Rot. . . . Come and dance.' She did dance, furiously, ferociously. The Diamond Palace, a glass-domed building at the foot of the woods, just above the sea, was the place where Cladgate danced. The negro band, its teeth gleaming with gold, its fingers glittering with diamond rings, stamped and shrieked, banged cymbals, clashed tins, thumped at drums, yelled and then suddenly murmured like animals creeping back, reluctantly, into the fastnesses of their jungles, and all the good British citizens and citizenesses of Cladgate wandered round and round with solemn ecstatic faces, their bodies pressed close together, sweat gathering upon their brows; beyond the glass roof the walks were dark and silent, and the sea crept in and out over the tiny pebbles, leaving a thin white pattern far down the deserted beach.

'What do you *mean*, Bunny?' asked Millie.

'Oh, you'll find out soon enough,' he answered her.

The glass roof sparkled above the electric light with a million facets. Across the broad floor there

stepped and shifted the changing pattern of the human bodies ; faces stared out over shoulders, blank, serious, grim as though the crisis—the true crisis—of life had at last arrived, and the band encouraged that belief, softly whispering that *now* was the moment—NOW—and NOW. . . .

Millie sat against the wall with Victoria ; she was waiting for Bunny, who was a quarter of an hour late. She had a panic, as she always had when he was late, that he would not come at all ; that she would never see him again. Her dress to-night was carnation colour, and she had shoes of silver tissue. She had an indescribable air of youth and trembling anticipation as though this were the first ball to which she had ever been. Henry would have been amazed had he seen her—her usually so fearless.

Her love for Bunny made her tremble, because, unknown to herself, she was afraid that the slightest movement from outside would precipitate her into a situation that would be disastrous, irremediable. . . .

Bunny arrived. She was in his arms and they were moving slowly round the room. She saw nothing, only felt that it was very hot. The negro band suddenly leapt out upon them, as though bursting forth from some hidden fastness. The glass roof, with its diamonds, becked and bowed, bending toward them like a vast string to a bow. Soon it would snap and where would they be ? Bunny held her very close to him. Their hearts were like voices jumping together, trying to catch some common note with which they were both just out of tune.

The band shrieked and stopped as though it had been stabbed.

They were outside, in a dark corner of the balcony that looked over the sea. They kissed and clung close to one another. Suddenly she was aware of an immense danger, as though the grey wood beyond the glass were full of fiery eyes, dangerous with beasts.

'I'm not going into that wood,' she heard some voice within herself cry. The band broke out again from beyond the wall. 'Oh, Bunny, let me go——' She had only a moment in which to save herself—to save herself *from* herself.

She broke from him. She heard her dress tear. She had opened the door of the balcony, was running down the iron steps; then, just as she was, in her carnation frock and silver shoes, was hurrying down the white road, away from the wood towards the hotel—the safe, large, empty hotel.

CHAPTER II

LIFE, DEATH, AND FRIENDSHIP

JUST at that time Henry at Duncombe was thinking very much of his sister. He could not tell why, but she was appearing to him constantly ; he saw her three nights in his dreams. In one dream she was in danger, running for her life along a sea-road, high above the sea. Once she was shouting to him in a storm and could not make him hear because of the straining and creaking of the trees. During his morning work in the little library he saw her, laughing at him on the lawn beyond the window—Millie as she was years ago, on that day, for instance, when she came back from Paris and astonished them all by her gaiety and was herself astonished by the news of Katherine's unexpected engagement. He could see her now in the old green drawing-room, laughing at them all and shouting into Great-Aunt Sarah's ear-trumpet. 'Well, she's in some trouble,' he said to himself, looking out at the sun-flecked lawn. 'I'm sure she's in trouble.'

He wrote to her, and to his relief received a letter from her on that same day. She said very little : '. . . Only another week of this place, and I'm not sorry. These last days haven't been

much fun. It's so noisy, and every one behaves as though a moment's quiet would be the end of the world. Oh, Henry darling, do come up to London soon after I get back, even if it's only for a day. I'm sure your old tyrant will let you off. I *ache* to see you and Peter again. I want you near me. I'm not a bit pleased with myself. I've turned *nasty* lately—conceited and vain. You and Peter shall scold me thoroughly. Vi says mother is just the same. . . .'

Well, she was all right. He was glad. He could sink back once more into the strange, mysterious atmosphere of Duncombe, and call with his spirit Christina down to share the mystery with him. He could creep closer to Christina here than real life would ever take him.

Strange and mysterious it was, and touchingly, poignantly beautiful. The wet days of early August had been succeeded by fine weather—English fine weather that was not certain from hour to hour, and gave therefore all the pleasure of unexpected joy.

'Why! there's the sun!' they would all cry, and the towers and the little square pond, and the Cupid, and the hedges cut into peacocks and towers and sailing-ships, would all be caught up into a sky so relentlessly blue that it surely never again would be broken. In a moment, white bolster clouds came slipping up; the oak and the mulberry tree, whose shadows had been black velvet patterns on the shrill green of the grass, seemed to spread out their arms beneath the threatening sky as though to protect their friends from the coming storm. But the storm was not there—only a few heavy drops, and then the grey horizon changed to

purple, the cloud broke like tearing paper, and in a few moments the shadows were on the lawn again and the water of the square pond was like bright-blue glass.

In such English weather the square English house was at its loveliest. The Georgian wing with its old red brick, its square stout windows, was material, comfortable, homely, speaking of thick-set squires and tankards of ale, dogs and horses, and long pipes of heavy tobacco. The little Elizabethan wing, where were the chapel and the empty rooms, touched Henry as though it were alive and were speaking to him. This old part of the house had in its rear two rooms that were still older, a barn used now as a garage with an attic above it that was Saxon.

The house was unique for its size in England —so small, and yet displaying so perfectly the three periods of its growth. It gained also from its setting because the hills rose behind the garden and the little wood like grey formless presences against the sky, and on the ridge below the house the village, with cottages of vast age and cottagers who seemed to have found the secret of eternal life, slumbered through the seasons, carrying on the tradition of their fathers and listening but dimly to the changes that were coming upon the world beyond them. The village had done well in the War, as the cross in front of the Post Office testified, but the War had changed its life amazingly little.

Some of its sons had gone over the ridge of hill, had seen strange sights and heard strange sounds —some of them had not returned. . . . Prices were higher—it was harder now to live than it had been, but not much harder. Already the new

generation was growing up. One or two, Tom Giles the Butcher, Merryweather, a farmer, talked noisily and said that soon the country would be in the hands of the people. Well, was it not already in the hands of the people? Anyway, they'd rather be in the hands of Sir Charles than of Giles.

How were they to know that Giles' friends would be better men than Sir Charles? Worse most likely. . . .

Into all this Henry sank. Among the few books in the library he found several dealing with the history of the house, of the Duncombes, of the district. Just as he had conjured up the Edinburgh of Scott and Ballantyne, so now his head was soon full of all the Duncombes of the past—Giles Duncombe of Henry VIII.'s time, who had helped his fat monarch to persecute the monasteries and had been given the lands of Saltingham Abbey near by as a reward; Charles Duncombe, the admiral who had helped to chase the Armada; Denis Duncombe, killed at Naseby; Giles Duncombe the Second, exquisite of Charles II.'s Court, killed in a duel; Guy Duncombe, his son, who had fled to France with James II.; Giles the Third of Queen Anne's Court, poet and dramatist; then the two brothers, Charles and Godfrey, who had joined the '45, Charles to suffer on the scaffold, Godfrey to flee into perpetual exile. Then Charles again, friend of Johnson and Goldsmith, writer of a bad novel called *The Forsaken Beauty*, and a worse play which even Garrick's acting could not save from being damned; then a seaman again, Troilus Duncombe, who had fought with Nelson at Trafalgar, and lost an arm there; then Ponsonby Duncombe, the historian, who had known Macaulay and written for the *Quarterly*, and had

drunk tea with George Lewes and his horse-faced genius; then Sir Charles's father, who had been simply a comfortable country squire — one of Trollope's men straight from *Orley Farm* and *The Claverings*, who had liked his eldest son, Ralph (killed tiger-shooting in India), and his youngest son Tom both better than the quiet, studious Charles, whom he had never understood. All these men and their women too seemed to Henry still to live in the house and haunt the gardens, to laugh above the stream and walk below the trees. So quiet was the place and so still that standing by the pond under the star-lit sky he could swear that he heard their voices. . . .

Nevertheless the living engaged his attention sufficiently. Besides Millie and Christina and Peter there were with him in the house, in actual concrete form, Sir Charles and his sister. Lady Bell-Hall had now apparently accepted Henry as an inevitable nuisance with whom God, for some mysterious reason known only to Himself, had determined still further to try her spirit. She was immensely busy here, having a thousand preoccupations connected with the house and the village that kept her happy and free from many of her London alarms. Henry admired her deeply as he watched her trotting about in an old floppy garden-hat, ministering to, scolding, listening to, admonishing the village as though it were one large, tiresome, but very lovable family. With the servants in the house it was the same thing. She knew the very smallest of their troubles, and although she often irritated and fussed them, they were not alone in the world as they would have been had Mrs. Giles, the butcher's wife, been their mistress.

It happened, then, that Henry for his daily companionship depended entirely upon Sir Charles. A strange companionship it was, because the affection between them grew stronger with every hour that passed, and yet there were no confidences nor intimacies—very little talk at all. At the back of Henry's mind there was always the incident in the cab. He fancied that on several occasions since then he had seen that glance of almost agonising suffering pass, flash in the eyes, cross the brow; once or twice Duncombe had abruptly risen and with steps that faltered a little left the room. Henry fancied also that Lady Bell-Hall during the last few days had begun to watch her brother anxiously. Sometimes she looked at Henry as though she would question him, but she said nothing.

Then, quite suddenly, the blow fell. On a day of splendid heat, the sky an unbroken blue, the fountain falling sleepily behind them, bees humming among the beds near by, Duncombe and Henry were sitting on easy-chairs under the oak. Henry was reading, Duncombe sitting staring at the bright grass and the house that swam in a haze of heat against the blue sky.

'Henry,' Duncombe said, 'I want to talk to you for a moment.'

Henry put down his book.

'I want first to tell you how very grateful I am for the companionship that you have given me during these last months and for your friendship.'

Henry stammered and blushed. 'I've been wanting—' he said, 'been wanting myself a long time to say something to you. I suppose that day when I had done the letters so badly and you—you still kept me on was the most important thing that

ever happened to me. No one before has ever believed I could do anything or seen what it was I could do—I always lacked self-confidence and you gave it me. The War had destroyed the little I'd had before, and if you hadn't come I don't know——'

He broke off, feeling, as he always did, that he could say none of the things that he really meant to say, and angry with himself for his own stupidity.

'I'm very glad,' Duncombe said, 'if I've done that. I think you have a fine future before you if you do the things you're really suited for—which you will do, of course. But I'm going to trust you still further. I know I can depend on your discretion——'

'If there's anything in the world——' Henry began eagerly.

'It's nothing very difficult,' Duncombe said, still smiling. 'I am in all probability going to have a serious operation. It's not yet quite settled—I shall know after a further examination. But it is almost certain. . . .

'There are definite chances that I shall not live through it—the chances of my surviving or not are about equal, I believe. I'll tell you frankly that if I were to think only of myself, death is infinitely preferable to the pain that I have suffered during the last six months. It was when the pain became serious that I determined to hurry up those family papers that you are now working on. I had an idea that I might not have much time left, and I wanted to find somebody who could carry them through. . . . Well, I have found somebody,' he said, turning towards Henry and smiling his slightly cynical smile. 'In my will I have left you a certain sum that will support you at any rate for the next

three years, and directions that the book is to be left entirely in your hands. . . . I know that you will do your best for it.'

Henry's words choked in his throat. He saw the bright grass and the red dazzled house through a mist of tears. He wanted, at that moment above all, to be practical, a hard, common-sense man of the world—but, of course, as usual he had no power to be what he wanted.

'Yes . . . my best . . .' he stammered.

'Then, what I mean is this,' Duncombe continued. 'If you do that you will still have some relations with my family, with my brother and sister, I mean. I want to say something about them to you.' He paused, then continued, looking in front of him as though for the moment he had forgotten Henry. 'When I first knew that my illness was serious, I felt that I could not leave all this. I had no other feeling for the time but that, that I must stay here and see this place safely through these difficult days . . .' He paused again, then looked straight across to Henry.

'I have not forgotten what happened in London in the library the other day. You will probably imagine from that that my brother is a very evil person. He is not, only impulsive, short-sighted, and not very clever at controlling his feelings. He has an affection for me but none at all for this place, and as soon as he inherits it he will sell it.

'It is that knowledge that is hardest now for me to bear. Tom is reckless with money, reckless with his affections, reckless with everything, but he is not a mean man. He came into the library that day to get some papers that he knew he should not have, rather as a schoolboy might go to the cup-

board and try to steal jam, but you will find when you meet him again that he bears no sort of malice and will indeed have forgotten the whole thing. My sister too—of course she is rather foolish and can't adapt herself to the new times, but she is a very good woman, utterly unselfish, and would die for Tom and myself without a moment's hesitation. If I go, be a help to her, Henry. She doesn't know you now at all, but she will later on, and you can show her that things are not so bad—that life doesn't change, that people are as they always were —certainly no worse, a little better perhaps. To her the world seems to be suddenly filled with ravening wolves—— Poor Meg!'

His voice died away. . . . Again he was looking at the house and the sparkling lawn.

'To lose this . . . to let it go—— After all these years.'

There was a long silence. Only the doves cooing from the gay-tiled roof seemed to be the voice, crooning and satisfied, of the summer afternoon.

'And that,' said Duncombe, suddenly waking from his reverie, 'is another idea that I have had. I feel as though you are going to be of importance in your new generation and that you will have influence. Even though I lose this place I shall be able to continue it in a way, perhaps, if I can make you feel that the past is not dead, that it *must* go on with its beauty and pathos influencing, interpenetrating the present. You young ones will have the world to do with as you please. Our time is done. But don't think that you can begin the world again as though nothing had ever happened before. There is all that loveliness, that beauty, longing to be used. The lessons that you are to

learn are the very same lessons that generation after generation has learnt before you. Take the past, which is beseeching you not to desert it, and let it mingle with the present. Don't let modern cleverness make you contemptuous of all that has gone before you. They were as clever as you in their own generation. This beauty, this history, this love that has sunk into these walls and strengthened these trees, carry these on with you as your companions. . . . I love it so . . . and I have to leave it. To know that it will go to strangers . . .'

Henry said, 'I'll never forget this place. It will influence all my life.'

'Well, then,' Duncombe shook his head almost impatiently, 'I've done enough preaching . . . nonsense, perhaps. It seems to me now important. Soon, if the pain returns, only that will matter.'

They sat for a long time in silence. The shadows of the trees spread like water across the lawn. The corners of the garden were purple-shaded.

'God! Is there a God, do you think, Henry?'

'Yes,' he answered. 'I think there is One, but of what kind He is I don't know.'

'There must be. . . . There must be. . . . To go out like this when one's heart and soul are at their strongest. And He is loving, too, I can't but fancy. He smiles, perhaps, at the importance that we give to death and to pain. So short a time it must seem to Him that we are here. . . . But if He isn't. . . . If there is nothing more—— What a cruel, cold game for Something to play with us——'

Henry knew then that Duncombe was sure he would not survive the operation. An aching longing to do something for him held him, but a

power greater than either of them had caught him, and he could only sit and stare at the colours as they came flocking into the garden with the evening sky, at the white line that was suddenly drawn above the garden wall, at two stars that were thrown like tossed diamonds into the branches of the mulberry.

'Yes—I know God exists,' something that was not Henry's body whispered.

'God must exist to explain all the love that there is in the world,' he said.

'And all the hatred too,' Duncombe answered, looking upward at the two stars. 'Why do we hate one another? Why all this temper and scorn, sport and cruelty? Men want to do right—almost every man and woman alive. And the rules are so simple —fidelity, unselfishness, loving-kindliness, humility —but we can't manage them except in little spurts. . . . But then, why should they be there at all? All the old questions!' He broke off. 'Come, let us go in. It's cold.' He got up and took Henry's arm. They walked slowly across the lawn together.

'Henry,' he said, 'remember to expect nothing very wonderful of men. Remember that they don't change, but that they are all in the same box together —so love them. Love them whenever you can, not dishonestly, because you think it a pretty thing to do, but honestly, because you can't help yourself. Don't condemn. Don't be impatient because of their weaknesses. That has been the failure of my life. I have been so badly disappointed again and again that I retired into myself, would not let them touch me—and so I lost them. But you are different —you are idealistic. Don't lose that, whatever

foolish things you may be dragged into. It seems to me so simple now that the end of everything has come and it is too late—love of man, love of God even if He does not exist, love of work—humility, because the time is so short and we are all so weak.'

By the door he stopped, dropping his voice. 'Be patient with my sister to-night. I am going to tell her about my affair. It will distress her very much. Assure her that it is unimportant, will soon be right. Poor Meg!'

He pressed Henry's arm and went forward alone into the dark house.

But how tiresome it is! That very same evening Henry, filled with noble thoughts and a longing for self-sacrifice, was as deeply and as childishly irritated by the events of the evening and by Lady Bell-Hall as he had ever been. In the first place, when he was dressing and had just found a clean handkerchief and was ready to go downstairs, the button-hole of his white shirt burst under his collar and he was forced to undress again and was ten minutes late downstairs.

He saw at once that Duncombe had told his sister the news. Henry had been prepared to show a great tenderness, a fine nobility, a touching fatherliness to the poor frightened lady. But Lady Bell-Hall was not frightened, she was merely querulous, with a drop of moisture at the end of her nose and a cross look down the table at Henry as though he were to-night just more than she could bear. It was also hard that on this night of all nights there should be that minced beef that Henry always found it difficult to encounter. It was not so much that the mince was cooked badly, and what

was worse, meanly and baldly, but that it stood as a kind of symbol for all that was mistaken in Lady Bell-Hall's housekeeping.

She was a bad housekeeper, and thoroughly complacent over her incompetence, and it was this incompetence that irritated Henry. Somehow to-night there should have been a gracious offering of the very best the place could afford, with some silence, some resignation, some gentle evidence of affection. But it was not so. Duncombe was his old cynical self, with no sign whatever of the afternoon's mood.

Only for a moment after dinner in the little grey drawing-room, when Duncombe had left them alone and Henry was seated reading Couperus and Lady Bell-Hall opposite to him was knitting her interminable stockings, was there a flash of something. She looked up suddenly and across at him.

'I learn from my brother that he has told you,' she said, blinking her eyes that were always watering at him.

'Yes,' said Henry.

'He tells me that it is nothing serious,' her voice quavered.

'No, no,' Henry half started up, his book dropping on to the floor. 'Indeed, Lady Bell-Hall, it isn't. He hopes to be all right in a week or two.'

'Yes, yes,' she answered, rather testily, as though she resented his fancying that he knew more about her brother's case than she herself did. 'But operations are always dangerous.'

'I had an operation once——' began Henry, then, seeing that her eyes were busy with her knitting again, he stopped. Nevertheless her little pink cheeks were shaking and her little obstinate chin

trembled. He could see that she was doing all she could to keep herself from tears. He could fancy her saying, 'Well, I'm not going to let that tiresome young man see me cry.' But touched as he was impetuously whenever he saw any one in distress, he began again: 'Why, when I had an operation once——'

'Thank you,' she said to her knitting, 'I don't think we'll talk about it, if you don't mind.'

He picked up his book again.

Next morning Henry asked for leave to go up to London for two days. He had been possessed, driven, tormented during the last week by thoughts of Christina, and in some mysterious way his talk with Duncombe in the garden had accentuated his longing. All that he wanted was to see her, to assure himself that she was not, as she always seemed to him when he was away from her, a figure in a dream, something imagined by him, more lovely, more perfect than anything he could read of or conceive, and yet belonging to the world of poetry, of his own imagined fictions, of intangible and evasive desires.

It was always this impulse that drove him back to her, the impulse to make sure that she was of flesh and blood, even though, as he was now beginning to realise, that same form and body were never destined to be his.

He had other reasons for going. Books in the library of the London house had to be consulted, and Millie would now be in Cromwell Road again. Duncombe at once gave him permission.

Going up in the train, staring out of the window, Henry tried to bring his thoughts into some sort of definite order. He was always trying to do

this, plunging his hands into the tangle, breaking through here, pulling others straight, trying to find a pattern that would give it all a real symmetry. The day suited his thoughts. The beautiful afternoon of yesterday had been perhaps the last smile of a none too generous summer. To-day autumn was in the air, mists curled up from the fields, clouds hung low against a pale watery blue, leaves were turning red once again, slowly falling through the mist with little gestures of dismay. What he wanted, he felt, thinking of Christina, of Duncombe, of Millie, of his work, of his mother lying without motion in that sombre house, of his own muddle of generosities and selfishnesses and tempers and gratitudes, was not so much to find a purpose in it all (that was perhaps too ambitious) as simply to separate one side of life from the other.

He saw them continually crossing, these two sides, not only in his own life, but in every other. One was the side of daily life, of his work for Duncombe, of money and business and Mr. King's bills, and stomach-ache and having a good night's sleep, and what the Allies were going to do about Vienna, and whether the Bolsheviks would attack Poland next spring or no. Millie and Peter both belonged to this world, and the Three Graces, and the trouble that he had to keep his clothes tidy, and whether any one yet had invented sock-suspenders that didn't fall down in a public place and yet didn't give you varicose veins—and if not, why not.

The other world could lightly be termed the world of the Imagination, and yet it was so much more, so *much* more than that. Christina belonged to it absolutely, and so did her horrible mother and the horrible old man Mr. Leishman. So did his

silly story, now at Chapter XV., so did the old Duncombe letters, so did the place Duncombe, so did Piccadilly Circus in certain moods, and the whole of London on certain days. So did many dreams that he had (and he did not want Mr. Freud, thank you, to explain them away for him), so did all his thoughts of Garth-in-Roselands and Glebeshire, so did the books of Galleon and Hans Andersen, and the author of *Lord Jim*, and La Motte Fouqué, and nearly all poetry ; so did the voice of a Danish singer whom he had heard one chance evening at a Queen's Hall Concert, and several second-hand bookshops that he knew, and many, many other things, moments, emotions that thronged the world. You could say that he was simply gathering his emotions together and packing them away and calling them in the mass this separate world. But it was not so. There were many emotions, many people whom he loved, many desires, ambitions, possessions that did not belong to this world. And Millie, for instance, complete and vital though she was, with plenty of imagination, did not know that this world existed. Could he only find a clue to it, how happy he would be ! One moment would be enough. If for one single instant the heavens would open and he could see and could say then : ' By this moment of vision I will live for ever ! I know now that this other world exists and is external, and that one day I shall enter into it completely.' He fancied—indeed he liked to fancy—that his adventure with Christina would, before it closed, offer him this vision. Meanwhile his state was that of a man shut into a room with the blinds down, the doors locked, but hearing beyond the wall sounds that came again and again to assure

him that he would not always be in that room—and shadows moved behind the blind.

Meanwhile on both worlds one must keep one's hand. One must be practical and efficient and sensible—oh yes (one's dreams must not interfere. But one's dreams, nevertheless, were the important thing.).

'Would you mind,' the voice broke through like a stone smashing a pane of glass. 'But your boot is——'

He looked up to find a nervous gentleman with pince-nez and a white slip to his waistcoat glaring at him. His boot was resting on the opposite seat and a considerable portion of the gentleman's trouser-leg.

He was terribly sorry, dreadfully embarrassed, blushing, distressed. He buried himself in Couperus, and soon forgot his own dreams in pursuing the adventures of the large and melancholy familiar to whose dismal fate Couperus was introducing him. And behind, in the back of his head, something was saying to him for the two-millionth time, 'I must not be such an ass! I must not be such an ass!'

He arrived in London at mid-day, and the first thing he did was to telephone to Millie. She would be back in her rooms by five that afternoon. His impulse to rush to Christina he restrained, sitting in the Hill Street library trying to fasten his mind to the monotonous voice of Mr. Spencer, who was so well up in facts and so methodical in his brain that Henry always wanted to stick pins into his trousers and make him jump.

When he reached Millie's lodgings she had not yet returned, but Mary Cass was there, just going

off to eat some horrible meal in an A.B.C. shop preparatory to a chemistry lecture.

'How's Millie?' he asked.

She looked him over as she always did before speaking to him.

'Oh, she's all right!' she said.

'Really all right?' he asked her. 'I haven't thought her letters sounded very happy.'

'Well, I don't think she is very happy, if you ask me,' Mary answered, slowly pulling on her gloves. 'I don't like her young man. I can't think what she chose him for.'

'What's he like?' asked Henry.

'Just a dressed-up puppy!' Mary tossed her head. 'But, maybe, I'm not fair to him. When two girls have lived together and like one another, one of them isn't in all probability going to be very devoted to the man who carries the other one off.'

'No, I suppose not.' Henry nodded his head with deep profundity.

'And then I despise men,' Mary added, tossing her head. 'You're a poor lot—all except your friend Westcott. I like *him*.'

'I didn't know you knew him,' said Henry.

'Oh yes, he's been here several times. Now if it were *he* who was going to carry Millie off! You know he's deeply in love with her!'

'He! Peter?' Henry cried, horrified.

'Yes, of course. Do you mean to say you didn't see it?'

'But he can't—he's married already!'

'Mr. Westcott married?' Mary Cass repeated after him.

'Yes, didn't you know? . . . But Millie knows.'

'Married? But when?'

'Oh, years ago, when he was very young. She ran away with a friend of his and he's never heard of her since. She must have been awful!' Henry drew a deep breath of disgust.

'Poor man!' Mary sighed. 'Everything's crooked in this beastly world. Nobody gets what he wants.'

'Perhaps it's best he shouldn't.'

Mary turned upon him. 'Henry, there are times when I positively loathe you. You're nearly the most detestable young prig in London—you would be if you weren't—if you weren't——'

'If I weren't——?' said Henry, blushing. Of all things he hated most to be called a prig.

'If you weren't such an incredible infant and didn't tumble over your boots so often——'

She was gone and he was alone to consider her news. Peter in love with Millie! How had he been so blind? Of course he could see it now, could remember a thousand things! Poor Peter! Henry felt old and protective and all-wise, then remembering the other things that Mary Cass had said, blushed again.

'Am I really a prig?' he thought. 'But I don't mean to be. But perhaps prigs never do mean to be. What is a prig, anyway? Isn't it some one who thinks himself better than other people? Well, I certainly don't think myself better——'

These beautiful thoughts were interrupted by Millie and, with her, Mr. Baxter.

It may be said at once to save further time and trouble that the two young men detested one another at sight. It was natural and inevitable that they should do so. Henry with his untidy

hair, his badly shaven chin, his clumsy clothes and his crookedly-balancing pince-nez would of course seem to Bunny Baxter a terrible fellow to appear in public with. It would shock him deeply, too, that so lovely a creature as Millie could possibly have so plain a relation. It would also be at once apparent to him that here was some one from whom he could hope for nothing socially, whether borrowing of money, introductions to fashionable clubs, or the name of a new tailor who allowed, indeed invited, unlimited credit. It was quite clear that Henry was a gate to none of these things. On Henry's side it was natural that he should at once be prejudiced against any one who was 'dressed up.' He admitted to himself that Baxter looked a gentleman, but his hair, his clothes, his shoes, had all of them that easy perfection that would never, never, did he live for a million years, be granted to Henry.

Henry disliked his fresh complexion, his moustache, the contemptuous curl of his upper lip. He decided at once that here was an enemy.

It would not in any case have been a very happy meeting, but difficulties were made yet more difficult by the fact, sufficiently obvious to the eyes of an already critical brother, that the two of them had been 'having words' as they came along. Millie's cheeks were flushed and her eyes angry, and that she looked adorable when she was thus did not substantially help the meeting.

Millie went into the inner room, and the two men sat stiffly opposite one another and carried on a hostile conversation.

'Beastly weather,' Mr. Baxter volunteered.

'Oh, do you think so?' Henry smiled, as though

in wonder at the extreme stupidity of his companion. 'I should have said it had been rather fine lately.'

Silence.

'Up in London for long?' asked Baxter.

'Only two days, I think. Just came up to see that Millie was all right.'

'You won't have to bother any more now that she's got me to look after her,' said Baxter, sucking the gold knob of his cane.

'As a matter of fact,' said Henry, 'she's pretty good at looking after herself.'

Silence.

'You're secretary to some old Johnny, aren't you?' asked Baxter.

'I'm helping a man edit some family papers,' said Henry with dignity.

'Same thing, isn't it?' said Baxter. 'I should hate it.'

'I expect you would,' said Henry, with emphatic meaning behind every word.

Silence.

'Know Cladgate?' asked Baxter.

'No,' said Henry.

'Beastly place. Wouldn't have been there if it weren't for your sister. Good dancing, though. Do you dance?'

'No, I don't,' said Henry.

'You're wise on the whole. Awful bore having to talk to girls you don't know. One simply doesn't talk, if you know what I mean.'

'Oh, I know,' said Henry.

Silence.

Millie came in. Henry got up.

'Think I'll be off now, Millie,' he said. 'Got

a lot to do. Will you creep away from your Cromwell Road to-morrow and have lunch with me?'

'All right,' she said, with a readiness that showed that this was in some way a challenge to Mr. Baxter.

'I'll fetch you—one-fifteen.'

With a stiff nod to Baxter, he was gone.

'By Jove, how your brother does hate me,' that young gentleman remarked. Then, with a sudden change of mood that was one of his most charming gifts, he threw himself at her feet.

'I'm a beast, Millie; I'm everything I shouldn't be, but I *do* love you so! I do! I do! . . . The only decent thing in my worthless life, perhaps, but it's true.'

And, for a wonder, it was.

On that particular afternoon he was very nearly frank and honest with her about many things. His love for her was always to remain the best and truest thing that he had ever known; but when he looked down into that tangle of his history and thence up into her clear, steadfast gaze his courage flagged—he could only reiterate again and again the one honest fact that he knew—that he did indeed love her with all the best that was in him. She knew that it was the perception of that that had first won her, and in all the doubts of him that were now beginning to perplex her heart, *that* doubt never assailed her. He *did* love her and was trying his best to be honest with her. That it was a poor best she was soon to know.

But to-day, tired and filled to the brim with ten hours' querulousness in the Cromwell Road household, she succumbed once more to a longing for love and comfort and reassurance. Once again

she had told herself that this time she would force him to clarity and truth—once again she failed. He was sitting at her feet ; she was stroking his hair ; soon they were locked in one another's arms.

CHAPTER III

HENRY IN LOVE

At half-past one next day Millie and Henry were sitting opposite one another at a little table in a Knightsbridge restaurant. This might easily have been an occasion for one of their old familiar squabbles—there was material sufficient—but it was a mark of the true depth of their affection that the one immediately recognised when the other was in real and earnest trouble; so soon as that was recognised any question of quarrelling—and they enjoyed immensely that healthy exercise—was put away. Henry made that recognition now, and, complicated though his own affairs were and very far from immediate happiness, he had no thought but for Millie.

She, as was her way, at once challenged him:

'Of course you didn't like him,' she said.

'No, I didn't,' he answered. 'But you didn't expect me to, did you?'

'I wanted you to. . . . No, I don't know. You'll like him when you know him better. You're always funny when any one from outside dares to try and break into the family. Remember how you behaved over Philip.'

'Ah, Philip! I was younger then. Besides,

there isn't any family to break into now. . . .' He leant forward and touched her hand. 'There isn't anything I want except for you to be happy, really there isn't. Of course for myself I'd rather you stayed as you are for a long time to come—it's better company for me, but that's against nature. I made up my mind to be brave when the moment came, but I'd imagined some one——'

'Yes, I know,' broke in Millie, 'that's what one's friends always insist on, that they should do the choosing. But it's me that's got to do the living.' She laughed. 'What a terrible sentence, but you know what I mean. . . . How do you know I'm not happy?' she suddenly ended.

'Oh, of course any one can see. Your letters haven't been happy, your looks aren't happy, you weren't happy with him yesterday——'

'I was—the last part,' she said, thinking. 'Of course we'd quarrelled just before we came in. We're always quarrelling, I'm sure I don't know why. I'm not a person to quarrel much, now am I?'

'We've quarrelled a good bit in our time,' said Henry reflectively.

'Yes, but that was different. This is so serious. Every time Bunny and I quarrel I feel as though everything were over for ever and ever. Oh, there's no doubt of it, being engaged's a very difficult thing!'

'Well, then, there it is,' said Henry. 'You love him and he loves you. There's nothing more to be said. But there *are* some questions I'd like to ask. What are his people? What's his profession? When are you going to be married? What are you going to live on when you are married?'

'Oh, that's all right,' she answered hurriedly. 'I'm to meet his mother in a day or two, and very soon he's going into a motor-works out at Hackney somewhere. There aren't many relations, I'm glad to say, on either side.'

'Thanks,' said Henry. 'But haven't you seen his mother yet?'

'No, she's been in Scotland.'

'Where does he come from?'

'Oh, they've got a place down in Wiltshire somewhere.'

She looked at him. He looked at her. Her look was loving and tender, and said, 'I know everything's wrong in this. You know that I know this, but it's my fight and I'm going to make it come right.' His look was as loving as hers, and said, 'I know that you know that I know that this is going all wrong and I'm doing my best to keep my eye on it, but I'm not going to force you to give him away. Only when the smash comes I'll be with you.'

All that he actually said was, 'Have another éclair?'

She answered, 'No thanks. . . .' Looking at him across the table she ended, as though this were her final comment on a long unspoken conversation between them:

'Yes, Henry, I know—but there are two ways of falling in love, one worshipping so that you're on your knees, the other protecting so that your arm goes round—I *know* he's not perfect—I know it better every day—but he wants some one like me. He says he does, and I know it's true. You'd have liked me,' she said almost fiercely, turning upon him, 'to have married some one like Peter.'

'Yes, I would. I'd have loved you to marry Peter—if he hadn't been married already.'

They went out into the street, which was shining with long lines of colour after a sudden scatter of rain.

She kissed him, ran and caught an omnibus, waved to him from the steps, and was gone.

He went off to Peter Street.

He was once more in the pink-lit, heavily-curtained room with its smell of patchouli and stale bread-crumbs, and once again he was at the opposite end of the table to Mrs. Jenssen, trying to engage her in pleasant conversation.

He realised at once to-day that their relationship had taken a further step towards hostility. She was showing him a new manifestation. When he came in she was seated dressed to go out, hurriedly eating a strange-looking meal that was here paper-bags and there sardines. She was eating this hurriedly and with a certain greed, plumping her thumb on to crumbs that had escaped to the table and then licking her fingers. Her appearance also to-day was strange: she was dressed entirely in heavy and rather shabby black, and her face was so thickly powdered and her lips so violently rouged that she seemed to be wearing a mask. Out of this mask her eyes flashed vindictively, greedily, and violently, as though she wished with all her heart to curse God and the universe but had no time because she was hungry and food would not wait. Another thing to-day Henry noticed: on other occasions when he had come in she had taken the trouble to force an exaggerated gentility, a refinement and elegance that were none

the less false for wearing a show of geniality. To-day there was no effort at manners : instead she gave one glance at Henry and then lifted up her saucer and drank from it with long thirsty gurgles. He always felt when he saw her the same uncanny fear of her, as though she had some power over him by which she with a few muttered words and a baleful glance could turn him into a rat or a toad and then squash him under her large flat foot. *She* was of the world of magic, of unreality, if you like to believe only in what you see with your eyes. She was real enough to eat sardines, though, and crunch their little bones with her teeth and then wipe her oily fingers on one of the paper-bags, after which she drank the rest of her tea, and then, sitting back in her chair, surveyed Henry, sucking at her teeth as she did so.

'Well, what have you come for to-day?' she asked him.

'Oh, just to pay you a visit.'

'Me! I like that. As though I didn't know what you're after. . . . She's in there. She'll be out in a minute. I'm off on some business of my own for an hour or two, so you can canoodle as much as you damned well please.'

Henry said nothing to that.

'Why didn't you make an offer for her?' Mrs. Jenssen suddenly asked.

'An offer?' Henry repeated.

'Yes. I'm sick of her. Been sick of her these many years. All I want is to get a little bit as a sort of wedding present, in return, you know, for all I've done for her, bringing her up as I have and feeding her and clothing her. . . . You're in love with her. You've got rich people. Make an offer.'

'You're a bad woman,' Henry said, springing to his feet, 'to sell your own daughter as though she were . . .'

'Selling be blowed!' replied Mrs. Jenssen calmly, pursuing a recalcitrant crumb with her finger. 'She's my daughter. I had the pain of bearing her, the trouble of suckling her, the expense of clothing her *and* keeping her respectable. She'd have been on the streets long ago if it hadn't been for me. I don't say I've always been all I should have been. I'm a sinful woman, and I'm glad of it—but you'll agree yourself she's a pure girl if ever there was one. *Dull* I call it. However, for those who like it there it is.'

Henry said nothing.

Mrs. Jenssen looked at him scornfully.

'You're in love with her, aren't you?' she asked.

'I'd rather not talk to you about what I feel,' Henry answered.

'Of course you're in love with her,' Mrs. Jenssen continued. 'I don't suppose she cares a rap for you. She doesn't seem to take to men at all, and you're not, if you'll forgive my saying so, altogether a beauty. You're young yet. But she'd do anything to get away from me. Don't I know it, and haven't I had to make my plans carefully to prevent it. So long as her blasted uncles keep out of this country for the next six months, with me she's got to stay, and she knows it. But time's getting short, and I've got to make my mind up. There are one or two other offers I'm considering, but I don't in the least object to hearing any suggestion you'd like to make.'

'One suggestion I'd like to make,' said Henry

hotly, 'is that I can get the police on your track for keeping a disorderly house. They'll take her away soon enough when they know what you've got in Victoria Street.'

'Now, then,' said Mrs. Jenssen calmly, 'that comes very near to libel. You be careful of libel, young man. It's got many a prettier fellow than you into trouble before now. Nobody's ever been able to prove a thing against me yet, and it's not likely a chicken like you is going to begin now. Besides, supposing you could, a pretty thing it would be for Christina to be exposed in the courts in such an affair. No, thank you. I can look after my girl better than that.'

Mrs. Jenssen got up, went to a mirror to put her hat straight, and then turned round upon him. She stood, her arms akimbo, looking down upon him.

'I don't understand you virtuous people,' she said, 'upon my word I don't. You make such a lot of fine talk about your nobility and your high conduct, and then you go and do things that no old drab in the street would lower herself to. Here are you, been sniffing round my daughter for months, and haven't got the pluck to lift a finger to take her out of what you think her misery and make her happy. Oh, I loathe you good people, damn the lot of you. You can go to hell for all I care, so you bloody well can. . . . You'd better make the most of your Christina while you've got the chance. You won't be coming here many more times.' With that she was gone, banging the door behind her.

Christina came in, smiled at him without speaking, carried the dirty remnants of her mother's meal into the inner room, returned and sat down, a book in her hand, close to him.

He saw at once that she was happy to-night. The fright was not in her eyes. When she spoke there was only a slight hint of the Danish accent which, on days when she was disturbed, was very strong.

She looked so lovely to him sitting there in perfect tranquillity, the thin green book between her hands, that he got exultant draughts of pleasure simply from gazing at her. They both seemed to enjoy the silence ; the room changed its atmosphere, as if in submission, perhaps, to their youth and simplicity. The bells from the church near Shaftesbury Avenue were ringing, and the gaudy clock on the mantelpiece, usually so inquisitive in its malicious chatter, now tick-tocked along in amiable approval of them both.

'I'm very glad you've come—at last,' she said. 'It's a fortnight since the other time.'

'Yes,' he answered, flushing with pleasure that she should remember. 'I've been in the country working. What are you reading?' he asked.

'Oh!' she cried, laughing. 'Do hear me read and see whether I pronounce the words right and tell me what some of them mean. It's poetry. I was out with mother and I saw this book open in the window with his picture, and I liked his face so much that I went in and bought it. It's lovely, even though I don't understand a lot of it. Now tell me the truth. If I read it very badly, tell me :

'It was a nymph uprisen to the breast
In the fountain's pebbly margin, and she stood
'Mong lilies, like the youngest of the brood.
To him her dripping hand she softly kist,
And anxiously began to plait and twist
Her ringlets round her fingers, saying : "Youth!

Too long, alas, hast thou starved on the ruth,
The bitterness of love: too long indeed,
Seeing thou art so gentle. Could I weed
Thy soul of care, by heavens, I would offer
All the bright riches of my crystal coffer
To Amphitrite; all my clear-eyed fish,
Golden, or rainbow-sided, or purplish,
Vermilion-tailed, or finned with silvery gauze;
Yea, or my veined pebble-floor, that draws
A virgin light to the deep; my grotto-sands
Tawny and gold, oozed slowly from far lands
By my diligent springs; my level lilies, shells,
My charming rod, my potent river spells;
Yes, everything, even to the pearly cup
Meander gave me,—for I bubbled up
To fainting creatures in a desert wild.
But woe is me, I am but as a child
To gladden thee; and all I dare to say,
Is, that I pity thee; that on this day
I've been thy guide; that thou must wander far
In other regions, past the scanty bar
To mortal steps, before thou canst be ta'en
From every wasting sigh, from every pain,
Into the gentle bosom of thy love.
Why it is thus, one knows in heaven above:
But, a poor Naiad, I guess not. Farewell!
I have a ditty for my hollow cell." '

'That's *Endymion*,' Henry said. 'Keats.'

'Keats!' she repeated, 'what a funny name for a poet. When I read it in the book I remembered very distantly when we were learning English at school there was such a name. What kind of man was he?'

'He had a very sad life,' said Henry. 'He had consumption, and the critics abused his poetry, and he loved a young lady who treated him very badly. He was very young when he died in Italy.'

'What was the name of the girl he loved?' she asked.

'Brawne,' said Henry.

'Ugh! what a horrible name! Keats and Brawne. Isn't England a funny country? We have beautiful names at home like Norregaard and Friessen and Christinsen and Engel and Röde. You can't say Röde.'

Henry tried to say it.

'No. Not like that at all. It's right deep in your throat. Listen! Röde—Röde, Röde.' She stared in front of her. 'And on a summer morning the water comes up Holman's Canal and the green tiles shine in the water and the ships clink-clank against the side of the pier. The ships are riding almost into Kongens Nytorv, and all along the Square in the early morning sun they are going.' She pulled herself up with a little jump.

'All the same, although he was called Keats, there are lovely words in what I was reading.' She turned to the book again, repeating to herself:

> 'All my clear-eyed fish, golden or rainbow-sided,
> My grotto-sands tawny and gold.'

'"Tawny." What's that?'

'Rich red-brown,' said Henry.

'Do I say most of the words right?'

'Yes, nearly all.'

She pushed the book away and looked at him.

'Now tell me,' he said, 'why you're happy to-day?'

She looked around as though some one might be listening, then leant towards him and lowered her voice.

'I've had a letter from my uncle, Uncle Axel. It's written from Constantinople. Luckily I got the letters before mother one morning and found this. He's coming to London as soon as ever he can to see after me. Mother would be

terribly angry if she knew. She hates Uncle Axel worst of them all. When he's there I'm safe ! '

Henry's face fell.

' I feel such a fool,' he said. ' Even your mother said the same thing. Here I've been hanging round for months and done nothing for you at all. Any other man would have got you away to Copenhagen or wherever you wanted to go. But I—I always fail. I'm always hopeless—even now when I want to succeed more than ever before in my life.'

His voice shook. He turned away from her.

' No,' she said. ' You've not failed. I couldn't have escaped like that. Mother would only have followed me. Both my uncles are abroad. There's no one in Copenhagen to protect me. I would rather—what do you call it ? hang on like this until everything got so bad that I *had* to run. You've been a wonderful friend to me these months. You don't know what a help you've been to me. I've been the ungrateful one.' She looked at him and drew his eyes to hers. ' Do you know I've thought a lot about you these last weeks, wondering what I could do in return. It seems unfair. I'd like to love you in the way you want me to. But I can't. . . . I've never loved anybody, not in *that* way. I loved my father and I love my uncles, but most of all I love places, the places I've always known, Odense and the fields and the long line against the sky just before the sunsets, and Kjöbenhavn when the bells are ringing and you go up Ostngarde and it's so full of people you can't move : in the spring when you walk out to Langlinie and smell the sea and see the ships come in and hear them knocking with hammers on the boats, and it's all so fresh and clean . . . and at twelve o'clock

when they change the guard and the soldiers come marching down behind the band into Kongens Nytorv and all the boys shout . . . I don't know,' she sighed, staring again in front of her. 'It's so simple there and every one's kind-hearted. Here ——' She suddenly burst into tears, hiding her face in her arms.

He came across to her, knelt down beside her, put his hands against her neck.

'Don't cry. Oh, don't cry, Christina. You'll go home soon. You will indeed. It won't be long to wait. No, don't bother. It's only my pince-nez. I don't mind if they do break. Your uncle will come and you'll go home. Don't cry. Please, please don't cry.'

He laid his cheek against her hot one, then, his heart hammering in his breast, he kissed her. She did not move away from him ; her cheek was still pressed against his, but, as he kissed her, he knew that it was true enough that whomsoever one day she loved it would not be him.

He stayed there, his hand against her arm. She wiped her eyes.

'I'm frightened,' she said. 'If Uncle Axel doesn't come in time . . . mother . . . Mr. Leishman.'

'I'm here,' Henry cried valiantly, feeling for his pince-nez, which to his delight were not broken. 'I'll follow you anywhere. No harm shall happen to you so long as I'm alive.'

She might have laughed at such a knight, with his hair now dishevelled, his eye-glasses crooked, his trouser-knees dusty. She did not. She certainly came nearer at that moment to loving him than she had ever done before.

CHAPTER IV

DEATH OF MRS. TRENCHARD

I HAVE said before that one of the chief complaints that Henry had against life was the abrupt fashion in which it jerked him from one set of experiences and emotions into another. When Christina laid her head on her arms and cried and he kissed her, Time stood still and History was no more.

He had been here for one purpose and one alone, namely to guard, protect, and cherish Christina so long as she might need him.

Half an hour later he was in his room in Panton Street.

A telephone message said that his mother was very ill and that he was to go at once to the Westminster house.

He knew what that meant. The moment had at last come, then. His mother was dying, was perhaps even then dead. As he stood by his shabby little table staring at the piece of paper that offered the message, flocks of memories — discordant, humorous, vulgar, pathetic — came to him, crowding about him, insisting on his notice, hiding from him the immediate need of his action. No world seemed to exist for him as he stood there staring but that thick scented one of Garth and Rafiel and

the Westminster house and the Aunts—and through it all, welding it together, the strong figure of his mother forcing it all into a shape upon which she had already determined, crushing it until suddenly it broke in her hands.

Then he remembered where he should be. He put on his overcoat again and hurried down the dark stairs into the street. The first of the autumn fogs was making a shy, half-confident appearance, peeping into Panton Street, rolling a little towards the Comedy Theatre, then, frightened at the lights, tumbling back and running down the hill towards Westminster. In Whitehall it plucked up courage to stay a little while, bunched itself around the book-shop on one side and the Horse Guards on the other, and became quite black in the face peeping into Scotland Yard. Near the Houses of Parliament it was shy again, and crept away after writhing itself for five minutes round St. Margaret's, up into Victoria Street, where it suddenly kicked its heels in the air, snapped its fingers at the Army and Navy Stores, and made itself as thick and confusing as possible round Victoria Station, so that passengers went to wrong destinations and trains snorted their irritation and annoyance.

To Henry the fog had a curious significance, sweeping him back to that evening of Grandfather's birthday, when, because of the fog, a stranger had lost himself and burst in upon their family sanctity for succour—the most important moment of young Henry's life perhaps! and here was the moment that was to close that earlier epoch, close it and lock it up and put it away, and the Fog had come once again to assist at the Ceremony.

In Rundle Square the Fog was a shadow, a thin

ghostly curtain twisting and turning as though it had a life and purpose all of its own. It hid and revealed, revealed and hid a cherry-coloured moon that was just then bumping about on a number of fantastically leering chimney-pots. The old house was the same, with its square set face, its air of ironic respectability, sniggering at its true British hypocrisy, alive though the Family Spirit that it had once enshrined was all but dead, was to-night to squeak its final protest. The things in the house were the same, just the same and in the same places—only there was electric light now where there had been gas, and there was a new servant-maid to take off his coat, a white-faced little creature with a sniffling cold.

She knew him apparently. 'Please, Mr. Henry, they're all upstairs,' she said. But he went straight into his father's study. There was no human being there, but how crammed with life it was, and a life so far from Christina and her affairs! It was surely only yesterday that he had stood there and his father had told him of the engagement between Katherine and Philip, and afterwards he had gone out into the passage and seen them kissing. . . . That too was an event in his life.

The books looked at him and remained aloof, knowing so much that he did not know, tired and sated with their knowledge of life.

He went upstairs. On the first landing he met Millie. They talked in whispers.

'Shall I go up?'

'Yes, you'd better for a moment.'

'How is she?'

'Oh, she doesn't know any of us. She can't live through the night.'

'Who's there?'

'Father and Katherine and the Aunts.'

'And she didn't know you?'

'None of us. . . .'

He went suddenly, stepping on tiptoe as though he were afraid of waking somebody.

The long dim bedroom was green-shaded and very soft to the tread. Beside the bed Katherine was sitting; nearer the window in an armchair Henry's father; on the far side of the bed, against the wall like images, staring in front of them, the Aunts; the doctor was talking in a low whisper to the nurse, who was occupied with something at the wash-hand stand—all these figures were flat, of one dimension against the green light. When Henry entered there was a little stir; he could not see his mother because Katherine was in the way, but he *felt* that the bed was terrible, something that he would rather not see, something that he ought not to see.

The thought in his brain was, 'Why are there so many people here? They don't want *all* of us. . . .'

Apparently the doctor felt the same thing, because he moved about whispering. He came at last to Henry. He was a little man, short and fat. He stood on his toes and whispered in Henry's ear, 'Better go downstairs for a bit. No use being here. I'll call you if necessary.'

The Aunts detached themselves from the wall and came to the door. Then Henry noticed that something was going on between his sister Katherine and the little doctor. She was shaking her head violently. He was trying to persuade her. No, she would not be persuaded. Henry suddenly

seemed to see the old Katherine whom through many years now he had lost—the old Katherine with her determination, her courage, her knowledge of what she meant to do. She stayed, of course. The others filed out of the door—Aunt Aggie, Aunt Betty, his father, himself.

They were down in the dining-room, sitting round the dining-room table. Millie had joined them.

Aunt Aggie looked just the same, Henry thought—as thin and as bitter and as pleased with herself—still the little mole on her cheek, the tight lips, the suspicious eyes.

They talked in low voices.

'Well, Henry.'

'Well, Aunt Aggie.'

'And what are you doing for yourself?'

'Secretarial work.'

'Dear, dear, I wouldn't have thought you had the application.'

His father was fatter, yes, a lot fatter. He had been a jolly-looking man once. Running to seed. . . . He'd die too, one day. They'd all die . . . all . . . himself. Die? *What* was it? *Where* was it?

'Oh yes, we like Long-Masterman very much, thank you, Millie dear. It suits Aggie's health excellently. You really should come down one day—only I suppose you're so busy.'

'Yes indeed.' Aunt Aggie's old familiar snort. 'Millie always *was* too busy for her poor old Aunts.'

How disagreeable Aunt Aggie was, and how little people changed, although you might pretend. . . . But he felt that he was changing all the time.

Suppose he wasn't changing at all? Oh, but that was absurd! How different the man who sat out in the garden at Duncombe from the boy who, at that very table, had sat after dinner on Grandfather's table looking for sugared cherries? Really different? . . . But, of course. . . . Yes, but really?

Aunt Aggie stood up. 'I really don't know what we're all sitting round this table for. They'll send for us if anything happens. I'm sure poor Harriet wouldn't want us to be uncomfortable.'

Henry and Millie were left there alone.

'How quiet the house is!' Millie gave a little shiver. 'Poor mother! I wish I felt it more. I suppose I shall afterwards.'

'It's what people always call a "happy release,"' said Henry. 'It really has been awful for her these last years. When I went up to see her a few weeks ago her eyes were terrible.'

'Poor mother,' Millie repeated again. They were silent for a little, then Millie said, 'You know, I've been thinking all the evening what Peter once said to us about our being enchanted—because we are young. There's something awfully true about it. When things are at their very worst—when I'm having the most awful row with Bunny, or Victoria's more tiresome than you can imagine—although I say to myself, "I'm perfectly miserable," I'm not really, because there's something behind it all that I'm enjoying hugely. I wouldn't miss a moment of it. I want every scrap. It is *like* an enchantment really. I suppose I'll wake up soon.'

Henry nodded.

'I feel it too. And I feel as though it must all have its climax in some wonderful adventure that's

coming to me. An adventure that I shall remember all the rest of my life. It seems silly, after the War, talking of adventures, but the War was too awful for one to dare to talk about oneself in connection with it, although it was immensely personal all the time. But we're out of the War now and back in life again, and if I can keep that sense of magic I have now, nothing can hurt me. The whole of life will be an adventure.'

'We *must* keep it,' said Millie. 'We must remember we had it. And when we get ever so old and dusty and rheumatic we can say, "Anyway we knew what life was once."'

'Yes, I know,' said Henry. 'And be one of those people who say to their children and other people's children if they haven't any of their own, "Ah, my dear, there's nothing like being young. My school-days were the happiest." Rot! as though most people's school-time wasn't damnable.'

'Oh it's nothing to do with age,' said Millie scornfully. 'The enchanted people are any age, but they're always young. The only point about them is that they're the only people who really know what life is. All the others are wrong.'

'We're talking terribly like the virtuous people in books,' said Henry. 'You know, books like Seymour's, all about Courage and Tolerance and all the other things with capital letters. Why is it that when a Russian or Scandinavian talks about life it sounds perfectly natural, and that when an Englishman does it's false and priggish?'

'I'm sure I don't know,' said Millie in an absent-minded voice. 'Isn't the house quiet? And isn't it cold? . . . Poor mother! It's so

horrid not being able to do anything. Katherine's feeling it terribly. She's longing for her to say just one word.'

'She won't,' said Henry. 'She'll hold out to the very last.'

At that moment Aunt Betty appeared in the doorway, beckoning to them.

A moment later they were all there gathered round the bed.

Now Henry could see his mother. She was lying, her eyes closed, but with that same determined expression in the face that he had so often seen before. She might be dead or she might be asleep. He didn't feel any drama in connection with his vision of her. Too many years had now intervened since his time with her. He did indeed recall with love and affection some woman who had been very good to him, who had taken him to Our Boys' Clothing Company to be fitted on, who had written to him and sent him cake when he was at school, and of whom he had thought with passionate and tearful appeal when he had been savagely bullied. But that woman had died long ago. This stern remorseless figure, who had cursed her children because they would not conform to the patterns that she had made for them, had confronted all his love of justice, of tolerance, of freedom. There had been many moments when he had hated her, and now when he was seeing her for the last time he could not summon false emotion and cry out at a pain that he did not feel. And yet he knew well that when she was gone remorse would come sweeping in, and that he would be often longing for her to return that he might tell her that he loved her and wished to atone

to her for all that he had done that was callous and selfish and unkind.

Worst of all was the unreality of the scene, the dim light, the faint scent of medicine, the closed-in seclusion as though they were all barred from the outside world which they were never to enter again. He looked at the faces—at Aunt Betty upset, distressed, moved deeply because in her tender heart she could not bear to see any one or anything unhappy; Aunt Aggie, severe, fancying herself benign and dignified, thinking only of herself; the doctor and the nurse professionally preoccupied, wondering perhaps how long this tiresome old woman would be in 'pegging out'; his father struggling to recover something of the old romance that had once bound him, tired out with the effort, longing for it all to be over; Millie, perfectly natural, ready to do anything that would help anybody, but admitting no falseness nor hypocrisy; Katherine—— !

It was Katherine who restored Henry to reality. Katherine was suffering terribly. She was gazing at her mother, an agonised appeal in her eyes.

'Come back ! Come back ! Come and say that you forgive me for all I have done, that you love me still——'

She seemed to have shed all her married life, her home with Philip, her bearing of children to him, her love for him, her love for them all. She was the daughter again, in an agony of repentance and self-abasement. Was the victory after all to Mrs. Trenchard ?

Katherine broke into a great cry:

'Mother ! Mother ! speak to me ! Forgive me !'

She fell on her knees.

Mrs. Trenchard's eyes opened. There was a slight movement of the mouth : it seemed, in that half light, ironical, a gesture of contempt. Her head rolled to one side, and the long long conflict was at an end.

CHAPTER V

NOTHING IS PERFECT

At that moment of Mrs. Trenchard's death began the worst battle of Millie's life (so far). She dated it from that, or perhaps from the evening of her mother's funeral four days later.

Mrs. Trenchard had expressed a wish to be buried in Garth, so down to Glebeshire they all went. The funeral took place on a day of the dreariest drizzling rain—Glebeshire at its earliest autumn worst. Afterwards they—Katherine, Millie, Henry, Philip, and Mr. Trenchard—sat over a spluttering fire in the old chilly house and heard the rain, which developed at night into a heavy downpour, beat upon the window-panes.

The Aunts had not come down, for which every one was thankful. Philip, looking as he did every day more and more a cross between a successful Prize-fighter and an eminent Cabinet Minister, was not thinking, as in Henry's opinion he should have been, of the havoc that he had wrought upon the Trenchard family, but of Public Affairs. Katherine was silent and soon went up to her room. Henry thought of Christina; his father retired into a corner, drank whisky, and went to sleep. Millie

struggled with a huge pillow of depression that came lolloping towards her and was only kept away by the grimmest determination.

Nobody except Katherine thought directly of Mrs. Trenchard, but she was there with them all in the room, and would be with one or two of them —Mr. Trenchard, senior, and Katherine, for instance —until the very day of their death.

Yes, perhaps after all Mrs. Trenchard *had* won the battle.

Millie went back to London with a cold, and the Cromwell Road seemed almost unbearable. A great deal of what was unbearable came of course from Victoria. Had she not witnessed it with her own eyes Millie could not have believed that a month at Cladgate could alter so completely a human being as it had altered Victoria. There she had tasted Blood, and she intended to go on tasting Blood to the end of the Chapter. It is true that Cladgate could not take all the blame for the transformation—Mr. Bennett and Major Mereward must also bear some responsibility. When these gentlemen had first come forward, Millie had been touched by the effect upon Victoria of ardent male attention. Now she found that same male attention day by day more irritating. Major Mereward she could endure, silent and clumsy though he was. It was certainly tiresome to find yourself sitting next to him day after day at luncheon when the most that he could ever contribute was 'Rippin' weather, what?' or 'Dirty sort of day to-day'—but he did adore Victoria, and would have adored her just as much had she not possessed a penny in the world. He thought her simply the wittiest creature in Europe and laughed at everything she

said, often long before she said it. Yes, he was a *good* man even though he was a dull one.

But if Major Mereward was good, Robin Bennett was most certainly bad. Millie very soon hated him with a hatred that made her shiver. She hated him, of course, for himself, but was it only that? Deep down in her soul there lurked a dreadful suspicion. Could it be that some of her hatred arose because in him she detected some vices and low qualities grown to full bloom that in twig, stem, and leaf were already sprouting in a younger soil? *Was* there in Robin Bennett a prophecy? No, no. Never, never, never. . . . And yet. . . . Oh, how she hated him! His smart clothes, his neat hair, his white hands, his soft voice! And Bunny liked him. 'Not half a bad fellow that man Bennett. Knows a motor-car when he sees one.'

Millie had it not in her nature to pretend, and she did not disguise for a moment on whose side she was.

'You don't like me?' Bennett said to her one day.

'No, indeed, I don't,' said Millie, looking him in the eyes.

'Why not?'

'Why? Because for one thing I'm very fond of Victoria. You're after her money. She'll be perfectly miserable if she marries you.'

He laughed. Nothing in life could disconcert him!

'Yes, of course I'm a Pirate.' (Hadn't some one else somewhere said that once?) 'This is the day for Pirates. There never *was* such a time for them. All sorts of people going about with money that they don't know what to do with. All sorts of

other people without any money ready to do anything to get it. No morality any more. Damned good thing for England. Hypocrisy was the only thing that was the matter with her—now she's a hypocrite no longer! You see I'm frank with you, Miss Trenchard. You say you don't like me. Well, I'll return the compliment. I don't like you either. Of course you're damned pretty, about the prettiest girl in London I should say. But you're damned conceited too. You'll forgive me, won't you? *You* don't spare *me*, you know. I tell young Baxter he's a fool to marry you. He'll be miserable with you.'

'You tell him that?' Millie said furiously.

'Yes, why not? You tell Victoria she'd be miserable with *me*, don't you? Well, then. . . . You're very young, you know. When you're a bit older you'll see that there's not so much difference between people like me and people like yourself as you think. We all line up very much the same in the end. I mayn't have quite your faults and you mayn't have quite mine, but when it comes to the Judgement Day I don't expect there'll be much to choose between Piracy and Arrogance.'

So far Mr. Bennett, and a victory cannot exactly be claimed for Millie in this encounter. She was furious. She was miserable. *Was* she so conceited? She'd ask Henry. She did ask the little doctor, who told her—'No. Only a little self-confident.' He was her only friend and support in these days.

'Be patient with Victoria,' he said. 'It's only a phase. She'll work through this.'

'She won't if she marries Mr. Bennett,' Millie said.

Meanwhile the old artists' colony was broomed right away. Eve was carried down to the cellar, the voice of Mr. Block was no longer heard in the land, and the poor little Russians went and begged for meals in other districts. Victoria danced, went to the theatre, and gave supper-parties.

She was quite frank with Millie.

'I don't mind telling you, Millie, that all that art wasn't quite genuine—not altogether. I *do* like pretty things, of course—you know me well enough to know that. And I do want to help poor young artists. But they're so ungrateful. Now aren't they, Millie? You can see it for yourself. Look at Mr. Block. I really did everything I could for him. But is he pleased? Not a bit. He's as discontented as he can be.'

'It's very difficult doing kindnesses to people,' said Millie sententiously. 'Sometimes you want to stop before they think you ought to.'

'Now you're looking at me reproachfully. That isn't fair. Why shouldn't I enjoy myself and be gay a little? And I love dancing; I daresay I look absurd, but so do thousands of other people, so what does it matter? My Millie, I *must* be happy. I must. Do you know that this is positively the first time I've been happy in all my life, and I daresay it's my last. . . . I know you often think me a fool. Oh, *I* see you looking at me. But I'm not such a fool as you think. I know about my age and my figure and all the rest of it. I know that if I hadn't a penny no one would look at me. You think that I don't know any of these things, but indeed I do. . . . It's my last fling, and you can't deprive me of it!'

'Oh, I don't want to deprive you of it,' cried

Millie, suddenly flinging her arms round the fat, red-faced woman, 'only I don't want you to go and do anything foolish—like marrying Mr. Bennett, for instance.'

'Now, why shouldn't I marry Mr. Bennett? Suppose I'm in love with him—madly. Isn't it something in these days when there are so many old maids to have a month of love even if he beats one all the rest of one's days? And anyway I've got the purse—I could keep him in check. . . . No, that's a nasty way of talking. And I'm certainly not in love with Bennett, nor with Mereward neither. I don't suppose I'll ever be in love with any one again.'

'You're lucky!' Millie broke out. 'Oh, you are indeed! It isn't happy to be in love. It's miserable.'

Indeed she was unhappy. She could not have believed that she would ever allow herself to be swung into such a swirl of emotions as were hers now. At one moment she hated Bunny, feeling herself bound ignobly, surrendering weakly all that was best in herself; at such a moment she determined that she would be entirely frank with him, insisting on his own frankness, challenging him to tell her everything that he was, as she now knew, keeping back from her . . . then she loved him so that she wanted only his company, only to be with him, to hear him laugh, to see him happy, and she would accept any tie (knowing in her heart that it was a lie) if it would keep him with her and cause him to love her. That he did love her through all his weakness she was truly aware: it was that awareness that chained her to him.

Very strange the part that Ellen played in all

this. That odd woman made no further demonstrations of affection ; she was always now ironically sarcastic, hurting Millie when she could, and she knew, as no one else in the place did, the way to hurt her. Because of her, Bunny came now much less to the house.

'I can't stand that sneering woman,' he said, 'and she loathes *me*.'

Millie tried to challenge her.

'Why do you hate Bunny?' she asked. 'He's never done you any harm.'

'Hasn't he?' Ellen answered, smiling.

'No, what harm has he done you?'

'I'll tell you one day.'

'I hate these mysteries,' Millie cried. 'Once you asked to be my friend. Now——'

'Now?' repeated Ellen.

'You seem to want to hurt me any way you can.'

Ellen had a habit of standing stiff against the wall, her heels together, her head back as though she were being measured for her height.

'Perhaps I don't like to see you so happy when I'm unhappy myself.'

Millie came to her.

'Why are you unhappy, Ellen? I hate you to be. I do like you. I do want to be your friend if you'll let me. I offended you somehow in the early days. You've never forgiven me for it. But I don't even now know what I did.'

Ellen walked away. Suddenly she turned.

'What,' she said, 'can people like you know about people like us, how we suffer, how we hate ourselves, how we are thirstier and thirstier and for ever unsatisfied. . . . No, I don't mean you any harm. I'll save you from Baxter, though. You're

too pretty. . . . You can escape even though I can't.'

There was melodrama in this, it seemed to Millie. It was quite a relief to have a fierce quarrel with Bunny five minutes later. The quarrel came, of course, from nothing—about some play which was, Bunny said, at Daly's, and Millie at the Lyric.

They were walking furiously down Knightsbridge. An omnibus passed. The play was at the Lyric.

'Of course I was right,' said Millie.

'Oh, you're always right, aren't you?'

Millie turned.

'I'm not coming on with you if you're like that.'

'Very well, then.' He suddenly stepped back to her with his charming air of penitence.

'Millie, I'm sorry. Don't let's fight to-day.'

'Well, then, take me to see your mother.'

The words seemed not to be hers. At their sudden utterance Knightsbridge, the trees of the Park were carved in coloured stone.

His mouth set. 'No, I can't.'

'Why not?'

'She's not—she's not in London.'

She knew that he was lying.

'Then take me to where she is.'

They were walking on again, neither seeing the other.

'You know that I can't. She's down in the country.'

'Then we'll go there.'

'We can't.'

'Yes, we can. Now. At once. If you ever want to speak to me again. . . .'

'I tell you—I've told you a thousand times—we must wait. There are reasons——'

'What reasons?'

'If you're patient——'

'I'm tired of being patient. Take me now or I'll never speak to you again.'

'Well then, don't.'

They parted. After an evening of utter misery she wrote to him:

My Darling Bunny—I know that I was hateful this afternoon. I know that I've been hateful other afternoons, and *shall* be hateful again on afternoons to come. You're not very nice either on these occasions. What are we to do about it? We do love one another—I know we do. We ought to be kinder to one another than we are to any one else, and yet we seem to like to lash out and hurt one another. And I think this is because there's something really wrong in our relationship. You make me feel as though you were ashamed to love me. Now why should you be ashamed? Why can't we be open and clear before all the world?

If you have some secret that you are keeping from me, tell me and we'll discuss it frankly like friends. Take me to see your mother. If she doesn't like me at first, perhaps she will when she knows me better. Anyway we shall be sure of where we are. Oh, Bunny, we could be *so* happy. Why don't you let us be? I know that it is partly my fault. I suppose I'm conceited and think I'm always right. But I don't really inside—only if you don't pretend to have an opinion of your own no one will ever listen to anything you say. Oh! I don't know what I'm writing. I am tempted to telephone to you and see if you are in, and if you are, to ask you to come over here. Perhaps you will come of your own accord. Every footstep outside the door seems to be yours, and then it goes on up the stairs. Don't let us quarrel, Bunny. I hate it so, and we say such horrid things to one another that we neither of us mean. Forgive me for anything I've done or said. I love you. I *love* you.

. . Bunny darling.—Your loving

M.

Her letter was crossed by one from him.

DEAREST MILLIE—I didn't mean what I said this afternoon. I love you so much that when we quarrel it's terrible. Do be patient, darling. You want everything to be right all in a moment. I'll tell you one day how difficult it has been all these months. You'll see then that it isn't all my fault. I'm not perfect, but I do love you. You're the most beautiful thing ever made, and I'm a lucky devil to be allowed to kiss your hand. I'll be round at Cromwell Road five o'clock to-morrow afternoon. Please forgive me, Millie darling.—Your loving

BUNNY.

'To-morrow afternoon at five o'clock' the reconciliation was complete. No secrets were revealed.

CHAPTER VI

THE RETURN

Peter Westcott, meanwhile, had been passing his London summer in a strange state of half-expectant happiness and tranquillity. It was a condition quite new to him, this almost tranced state of pause as though he were hesitating outside the door of some room. Was some one coming who would enter with him? Was he expecting to see some treasure within that might after all not be there? Was he afraid to face that realisation?

Throughout the whole of that solitary August he had with him three joys—London, the book that was now slowly day by day growing, and Millie. When he was young he had taken all he could get—then everything had been snatched from him—now in his middle age life had taught him to savour everything slowly, to expect nothing more than he perceived actually before him; he had grown selfish in his consciousness of his few treasures. If he shared with others, perhaps the gods would grow jealous and rob him once again.

People might deride or condemn. He was shy now; his heart went out as truly, as passionately as it had ever done, but he alone now must know that. Henry and Millie, yes—they might know

something—had he not sworn comradeship with them? But not even to them could he truly speak of his secrets. He had talked to Henry of his book, and even discussed it with him, but he would not put into spoken words the desires and ambitions that, around it, were creeping into his heart. He scarcely dared own them to himself.

Of his feeling about London he did not speak to any one because he could not put it into words. There was something mysterious in the very soul of the feeling. He could tell himself that it was partly because London was a middle-aged man's town. Paris was for youth, he said, and New York too, and Berlin perhaps, but London did not love you until you were a little tired and had known trouble and sorrow and lost your self-esteem. Then the grey-smoked stone, the grey of pigeon's wings, and the red-misted sky and the faint dusty green of the trees settled about your heart and calmed you. Now when the past is something to you at last, and the scorn of the past that you had in your youth is over, London admits you into her comradeship. 'There is no place,' he said to himself, 'where one can live in such tranquillity. She is like a woman who was once your mistress, whom you meet again after many years and with whom at last, now that passion is gone, you can have kind, loving friendship. Against the grey-white stone and the dim smoke-stained sky the night colours come and go, life flashes and fades, sounds rise and fall, and kindliness of heart is there at the end.' He found now that he could watch everything with a passionate interest. Marylebone High Street might not be the most beautiful street in London, but it had the charm of a small country town where, closing

your eyes, you could believe that only a mile away there was the country road, the fir-wood, the high, wind-swept down. As people down the street stopped for their morning gossip and the dogs recognised their accustomed friends and the little bell of the tiny Post Office jangled, London rolled back like a thick mist on to a distant horizon and its noise receded into a thin and distant whisper of the wind among the trees. Watching from his window he came to know faces and bodies and horses; he grew part of a community small enough to want his company, but not narrow enough to limit his horizon.

His days during those months were very quiet and very happy. He worked in the morning at his book, at some reviewing, at an occasional article. His few friends, Campbell, Martha Proctor, Monteith perhaps, James Maradick, one or two more, came to see him or he went to them. There was the theatre (so much better than the highbrows asserted), there were concerts. There was golf at a cheap little course at Roehampton, and there were occasional week-ends in the country . . . as a period of pause before some great event—those were happy months. Perhaps the great event would never come, but never before had he felt so deeply assured that he was moving towards something that was to change all his life. Even the finishing of his book would do that. It was called *The Fiery Tree*, and began with a man who, walking at night towards a town, loses his way and takes shelter in an old farmhouse. In the farmhouse are two men and an old woman. They consent to put him up for the night. He goes to his room, and looking out from his window on

the moonlit garden he sees, hiding in an apple-tree. . . . What does he see? It does not matter. In the spring of 1922 the book will be published —*The Fiery Tree*, By Peter Westcott : Author of *Reuben Hallard*, etc.—and you will be able to judge whether or no he has improved as a writer after all these years. Whether he has improved or no, the principal fact is that day after day he got happiness and companionship and comfort from his book. It might be good : it might be bad : he said he did not know. Campbell was right. He did his best, secured his happiness. What came when the book was between its covers was another matter.

Behind London and the book was Millie. She coloured all his day, all his thoughts : sometimes she came before him with her eyes wide and excited like a child waking on her birthday morning. Sometimes she stood in front of him, but away from him, her eyes watching him with that half-ironical suggestion that she knew all about life, that he and indeed all men were children to her whom she could not but pity—that suggestion that went so sweetly with the child in herself, the simplicity and innocence and confidence.

And then again she would be before him simply in her beauty, her colour, gold and red and dark, her body so straight, so strong, so slim, and the loveliness of her neck, her hands, her breast. Then a mist came before his eyes and he could see no more.

Sometimes he ached to know how she was, whether she were happy with this man to whom she was engaged ; he had no thought any more of having her for himself. That was one thing

that his middle-age and his past trouble had brought him—patience, infinite, infinite patience.

Then, as unheralded as such things usually are, the crisis came. It was a foggy afternoon. He came in about half-past three, meaning to work. Just as he was about to sit down at his table his telephone bell rang. He was surprised to hear Martha Proctor's voice : he was still more surprised when she told him that she was at Selfridge's and would like to come in and have tea if he were alone.

Martha Proctor ! The last of the Three Graces to pay him any attention, he said. 'But I like her. I've always liked her best of the three. . . .'

He got his tea-things from the little brown cupboard, made some toast, found a pot of raspberry jam ; just as he had finished, Martha Proctor stalked in. He liked her clear-cut ways, the decent friendly challenge of her smile, her liking for brown bread and jam, with no nonsense about 'not being really hungry.' Yes, he liked her—and he was pleased that she had troubled to come to him, even though it was only the fog that had driven her in. But at first his own shyness, the eternal sense always with him that he was a recognised failure, and that no one wanted to hear what he had to say, held him back. There fell silences, silences that always came when he was alone with anybody.

He had not the gift of making others enthusiastic, of firing their intelligence. Only Millie and Henry, and perhaps James Maradick and Bobby Galleon, were able to see him as he really was. With others he always thought of the thing that he was going to say before he said it ; then, finding it priggish, or sententious, or platitudinous, didn't

say it after all. No wonder men found him dull!

He liked Martha Proctor, but the first half-hour of their meeting was not a success. Then with a smile he broke out:

'You know—you wouldn't think it—but I'm tremendously glad the fog drove you in here to-day. There are so many things I want to talk about, but I've lost my confidence somehow in any one being interested in what I think.'

'If you imagine it was the fog,' said Martha Proctor, 'that brought me in to-day, you are greatly mistaken. I've been meaning to come for weeks. You say you're diffident; well, I'm diffident too, although I wouldn't have any one in the world to know it. Here I am at forty-two, and I'm a failure. No, don't protest. It's true. I know I've got a name and something of a position, and young authors are said to wait nervously for my Olympian utterances, but as a matter of fact I've got about as much influence and power as that jam-pot there. But it isn't only with myself I'm disappointed—I'm disappointed with everybody.'

She paused then, as though she expected Peter to say something, so he said:

'That's pretty sweeping.'

'No, it isn't. The state of literature in London is rotten, more rotten than I've ever known it. Everybody over forty is tired and down and out, and everybody under thirty has swelled head. And they're all in sets and cliques. And they're all hating one another and abusing one another and running their own little pets. And all the little pets that might have turned into good writers if they'd been let alone have been spoiled and ruined.'

She paused for breath, then went on, growing really excited: 'Look at young Burnley, for instance. There's quite a promising dramatist—you know that *The Rivers Family* was a jolly good play. Then Monteith gets hold of him, persuades him that he's a critic, which, poor infant, he never was and never will be, lets him loose on his paper and ruins his character. Yes, ruins it! Six months later he's reviewing the same book in four different papers under four different names, and hasn't the least idea that he's doing anything dishonest!

'But Burnley isn't the point. It's the general state of things. Monteith and Murphy and the rest think they're Olympians. They're as full of prejudices as an egg is full of meat, and they haven't got a grain of humour amongst the lot. They aren't consciously dishonest, but they run round and round after their own tails with their eyes on the ground. Now, I'm only saying what lots of us are feeling. We want literature to become a jollier, freer thing; to be quit of schools and groups, and to have altogether more fun in it. That's why I've come to you!'

'To me!' said Peter, laughing. 'I'm not generally considered the most amusing dog in London——'

'No, you're not,' said Miss Proctor. 'People don't know you, of course. Lots of them think you dull and conceited. You may be proud, but you're certainly not conceited—and you're not dull.'

'Thank you,' said Peter.

'No, but seriously, a lot of us have been considering you lately. You see, you're honest—no one would deny that—and you're independent, and even if you're proud you're not so damned proud

as Monteith, and you haven't got a literary nursery of admiring pupils. You'd be surprised, though, if you knew how many friends you have got.'

'I should be indeed,' said Peter.

'Well, you have. Of course Janet Ross and the others of her kind think you're no good, but those are just the cliques we want to get away from. To cut a long story short, some of us—Gardiner, Morris, Billy Wells, Thompson, Thurtell, and there are others—want you to join us.'

'What are you going to do?'

'Nothing very definite at the moment. We are going to be apart from all cliques and sets——'

'I see,' interrupted Peter,—'be an anti-clique clique.'

'Not at all,' said Martha Proctor. 'We aren't going to call ourselves anything or have meetings in an A.B.C. shop or anything of the kind. It is possible that there'll be a paper one day—a jolly kind of paper that will admit any sort of literature if it's good of its kind; not only novels about introspective women and poems about young men's stomachs on a spring morning. I don't know. All we want now is to be a little happier about things in general, to be a little less jealous of writing that isn't quite our kind, and, above all, not to be Olympian!'

She banged the table with her hand and the jam-pot jumped. 'I hate the Olympians! Damn the Olympians! Self-conscious Olympians are the worst things God ever made . . . I'm a fool, you're not very bright, but we're not Olympian, therefore let's have tea together once or twice a year!'

Soon after that she went. Peter had promised to come to her flat one evening soon and meet some

of her friends. She left him in a state of very pleasurable excitement.

He walked up and down his room, lurching a little from leg to leg like a sailor on his deck. Yes, he was awfully pleased—*awfully* pleased. . . . Somebody wanted him. Somebody thought his opinion worth the having.

There were friendly faces, kindly voices waiting for him.

His ambition leapt up again like fire. Life was not over for him, and although he might never write a fine book nor a word that would be remembered after he was gone, yet he could help, take his share in the movement, encourage a little what seemed to him good, fight against everything that was false and pretentious and insincere.

He felt as though some one were pushing the pieces of the game at last in his favour. For long he had been baffled, betrayed, checked. Now everything was moving together for him. Even Millie . . . !

He stopped in his walk, staring at the window behind whose panes the fog lay now like bales of dirty cotton. Millie ! Perhaps this engagement of hers was not a success. He did not know why, but he had an impression that all was not well with her. Something that Henry had said in a letter. Something. . . . So long as she were still there so that he might see her and tell her of his work. See her, her colour, her eyes, her hands, her movement as she walked, her smile so kindly and then a little scornful as though she were telling herself that it was not grown-up to show kindness too readily, that they must understand that she *was* grown-up. . . .

Oh, bless her! He would be her true friend whatever course her life might take, however small a share himself might have in it.

He stared at the window, and his happiness, his new ambition and confidence were suddenly penetrated by some chill breath. By what? He could not tell. He stood there looking in front of him, seeing nothing but the grey shadows that coiled and uncoiled against the glass.

What was it? His heart seemed to stand still in some sudden anticipation. What was it? Was some one coming? He listened. There was no sound but a sudden cry from the fog, a dim taxi-whistle. Something was about to happen. He was sure as one is sure in dreams with a knowledge that is simply an anticipation of something that one has already been through. Just like this once he had stood, waiting in a closed room. Once before. Where? Who was coming? Some one out in the fog was now looking at the number of his house-door. Some one had stepped into the house. Some one was walking slowly up the stairs, looking at the cards upon the doors. It was as though he were chained, enchanted to the spot. Now his own floor. A pause outside his door. When suddenly his bell rang he felt no surprise, only a strange hesitation before he moved as though a voice were saying to him: 'This is going to be very difficult for you. Pull yourself together. You'll need your courage.'

He opened his door and peered out. The passage was dark. A woman was there, standing back, leaning against the banisters.

'Who's there?' he called. His voice echoed back to him from the empty staircase. The woman

made no answer, standing like a black shadow against the dark stain of the banisters.

'Do you want anything?' asked Peter. 'Did you ring my bell?'

She moved then ever so slightly. In a hoarse whisper she said, 'I want to speak to Mr. Westcott.'

'I'm Peter Westcott,' he answered.

She moved again, coming a little nearer.

'I want to sit down,' she said. 'I'm not very well.' She gave a little sigh, her arms moved in a gesture of protest, and she sank upon the floor. He went to her, lifted her up (he felt at once how small she was and slight), carried her into his room and laid her on his old green-backed sofa.

Then, bending over her, he saw that she was his wife, Clare.

Instantly he was flooded, body and soul, with pity. He had, he could have, no other sense but that. It had been, perhaps, all his life, even during those childish years of defiance of his father, the strongest emotion in him—it was called forth now as it had never been before.

He had hurried into his bedroom, fetched water, bathed her forehead, her hands, taken off the shabby hat, unfastened the faded black dress at the throat; still she lay there, her eyes closed in the painted and powdered face, the body crumpled up on the sofa as though it were broken in every limb.

Broken! Indeed she was! It was nearly twenty years since he had last seen her, since that moment when she had turned back at the door, looking at him with that strange appeal in her eyes, the appeal that had failed. He heard again, as though it had been only yesterday, her voice in

their last conversation—' I've got a headache. I'm going upstairs to lie down. . . .' And that had been the end.

She smelt of some horrible scent, the powder on her face blew off in little dry flakes, her hair was still that same wonderful colour, yellow gold ; she must be forty now—her body was as slight and childish as it had been twenty years ago. He rubbed her hands : they were not clean, and the nails were broken.

She moved restlessly without opening her eyes, as though in her sleep ; she pushed against him, then freed her hands from his, muttering. He caught some words : ' No, Alex—no. Don't hurt me. I want to be happy ! Oh, I want to be happy ! Oh, don't hurt me ! Don't ! '

All this in a little whimper as though she had no strength left with which to cry out. Then her eyes opened : she stared about her, first at the ceiling, then at the table and chairs, then at Peter.

She frowned at him. ' I oughtn't to have come here,' she said. ' You don't want me—not after all this time. Did I faint ? How silly of me ! ' She pushed herself up. ' That's because I'm so hungry—so dreadfully hungry. I've had nothing to eat for two days except what that man gave me at the station . . . I feel sick, but I must eat something——'

' Hungry ! ' he sprang to his feet. ' Just lie there a minute and rest. Close your eyes. There ! Lie back again ! I'll have something ready in a moment.'

He rushed into the little kitchen, found the kettle, filled it and put it on the sitting-room fire. The tea-things were still on the table, a plate with

cakes, a loaf of bread, the pot of jam. She was sitting up staring at them. She got up and moved across to the table. 'Cut me some bread quickly. Never mind about the tea.'

He cut her some bread and butter. She began to eat, tearing the bread with her fingers, her eyes staring at the cakes. She snatched two of them and began to eat them with the bread. Suddenly she stopped.

'Oh, I can't!' she whispered. 'I'm so hungry, but I can't—I'm going to be sick.'

He led her into his bedroom, his arm around her. There she was very ill. Afterwards white and trembling she lay on his bed. He put the counterpane over her, and then said:

'Would you like a doctor?' She was shivering from head to foot.

'No,' she whispered. 'Would you make me some tea—very hot?'

He went into the sitting-room, and in a fever of impatience waited for the kettle to boil. He stood there, watching it, his own emotion so violent that his knees and hands were trembling.

'Poor little thing! Poor little thing! Poor little thing!' He found that he was repeating the words aloud. . . . The lid of the kettle suddenly lifted. He made the tea and carried it into the other room. It was dark now, with the fog and the early evening. He switched on the light, and then as she turned, making a slight movement of protest with her hand, he switched it off again. She sat up a little, catching at the cup, and then began to drink it with eager, thirsty gulps.

'Ah, that's good!' he heard her murmur. 'Good!' He gave her some more, then a third

cup. With a little sigh she sank back satisfied. She lay then without speaking and he thought she was asleep. He drew a chair to the bedside and sat down, leaning forward a little towards her. He could not see her now at all : the room was quite dark.

Suddenly she began to speak in a low, monotonous voice :

'I oughtn't to have come. . . . Do you know I nearly came once last year ? I was awfully hard up and I got your address from the publishers. I didn't like to go to them again this time. It was just chance that you might still be here. I wouldn't have come to you at all if I hadn't been so hard up. . . .'

'Hush,' he said, 'you oughtn't to talk. Try and sleep.'

She laughed. 'You say that just as you used to. You aren't changed very much—fatter a bit. I'd have known you anywhere. I wouldn't have come if I'd known where Benois was. He's in London somewhere, but he's given me the slip. Not the first time either. . . . I'm not going to stay here, you know. You needn't be frightened.'

The voice was changed terribly. He would have recognised it from the thin sharp note, almost of complaint, that was still in it, but it was thickened, coarsened, with a curious catch in it as though her breathing were difficult.

'Don't talk now. Rest ! ' he repeated.

'Yes, you're not changed a bit. Fatter, of course. I've often wondered what you'd turned into. How you got on in the War. You know Jerry was killed—quite early, at the beginning. He was in the French Army. He treated me badly. But

every one's treated me badly. All I wanted was to be happy. I didn't mean to do any one any harm. It's cruel the way I've been treated.'

Her voice died off into a murmur. He caught only the words 'Benois . . . Paris . . . Station.'

Soon he heard her breathing, soft with a little catch in it like a strangled sob. He sat on then, hearing nothing but that little catch. He did not think at all. He could see nothing. He was sightless in a blind world, coil after coil of grey vapour moving about him, enclosing him, releasing him, enclosing him again — 'Poor little thing! Poor little thing! Poor little thing!'

He did not move as the evening passed into night.

CHAPTER VII

DUNCOMBE SAYS GOOD-BYE

At the moment when Clare Westcott was climbing the stairs to her husband's rooms Henry Trenchard was walking up the drive through the Duncombe park. The evening air was dark and misty with a thin purple thread of colour that filtered through the bare trees and shone in patches of lighted shadow against tall outlines of the road. Everything was very still; even his steps were muffled by the matted carpet of dead leaves that had not been swept from the drive. He had told them the time of his arrival, but there had been nothing at the station to meet him. That did not surprise him. It had happened before. You could always find a fly at the little inn; but this evening he had wanted to walk the few miles. Something made him wish to postpone the arrival if he could.

The day after to-morrow Duncombe was to go up to London for his operation. Henry hated scenes and emotional atmospheres, and he knew that Duncombe also hated them. Everything, of course, would be very quiet during those two days —beautifully restrained in the best English fashion, but the emotion would be there. No one would be frank; every one would pretend to be gay with

that horrible pretence that Englishmen succeed in so poorly. No one would be worse at it than Henry himself.

As he turned the corner of the drive that gave the first view of the house, a thin white light, a last pale flicker before dusk, enveloped the world, spread across the lawn and shone upon the square, thick-set building as though a sheet of very thin glass had suddenly been lowered from the sky. The trees were black as ink, the grass grey, but the house was illumined with a ghastly radiancy under the bare branches and the pale evening sky. The light passed and the house was in dusk.

When he had been up to his room and come down to the little drawing-room he found Alicia Penrose. 'She's been asked to make things easier,' he said to himself. He was glad. He was not afraid of her as he was of some people, and he fancied that she rather liked him. In her presence he always felt himself an untidy, uncouth schoolboy, but to-night he was not thinking of himself. He knew that beneath her nonsense she was a good sort. She was standing, legs apart, in front of the fire ; she was wearing a costume of broad checks, like a chessboard. It reached just below her knees, but she had fine legs, slim, strong, sensible. Her hair, brushed straight back from her forehead, was jet-black ; she had beautiful, small, strong hands.

'Well, Trenchard,' she said, 'had enough of London ?'

He stammered, laughed, and said nothing.

'Why do you always behave like a complete idiot when you're with me ?' she asked. 'You're not an idiot—know you're not from what Duncombe has told me—always behave like one with me.'

'Perhaps you terrify me!' said Henry.

'Damn being terrified! Why be terrified of anybody? All the same, all of us. Legs, arms—All dead soon.'

'Shyness is a very difficult thing,' said Henry. 'I've suffered from it all my life—partly because I'm conceited and partly because I'm not conceited enough.'

'Have you indeed?' said Lady Alicia, looking at him with interest. 'Now that's the first interestin' thing you've ever said to me. Expect you could say a lot of things like that if you tried.'

'Oh, I'm clever!' said Henry. 'The trouble is that my looks are against me. That's funny, too, because I have a most beautiful sister and another who's quite nice-looking. I suppose they took all the looks of the family and there were none left for me.'

Lady Alicia considered him.

'But you're not bad-lookin',' she said. 'Not at all. It's an interestin' face. You look as though you were a poet or something. It's your clothes. Why do you dress so badly?'

'My clothes are all right when I buy them,' said Henry, blushing. (This was a sensitive point with him.) 'I go to a very good tailor. But when I've worn them a week or two they're like nothing on earth, although I put them under my bed and have a trouser-press. I look very fine in the morning sometimes just for five minutes, but in an hour it's all gone.'

Lady Alicia laughed.

'You want to marry—some woman who'll look after you.'

Next moment Henry had a shock. The door

opened and in came Tom Duncombe. Henry had not seen him since the day of their encounter. In spite of himself his heart failed him. What would happen? How awful if, in front of Lady Alicia, Duncombe went for him! What should he do? How maintain his dignity? How not show himself the silly young fool that he felt?

Duncombe crossed the room, fat, red-faced, smiling. 'Well, Alice,' he said, 'glad to see you. How's everything?'

Then he turned to Henry, holding out his hand.

'Glad to see you, Trenchard,' he said. 'Hope you're fit.'

'Very,' said Henry.

They shook hands.

That evening was a strange one. The comedy of *Old Masks to hide a New Tragedy* was played with the greatest success. A thoroughly English piece, played with all the best English restraint and fine discipline. Sir Charles Duncombe as the hero was altogether admirable, and Lady Bell-Hall as the heroine won, and indeed deserved, rounds of applause. Lady Alicia Penrose as the Comic Guest played in her own inimitable style a part exactly suited to her talents. Minor rôles were suitably taken by Thomas Duncombe, Henry Trenchard, and Miss Bella Smith as Florence, a Parlourmaid. . . .

Henry was amazed to see Lady Bell-Hall's splendid *sang-froid*. The house was tumbling about her head, her beloved brother was in all probability leaving her for ever, the whole of her material conditions were to change and be transformed, yet she, who beyond all women depended upon the permanence of minute signs and wit-

nesses, gave herself no faintest whisper of apprehension.

Magnificent little woman, with her pug nose and puffing cheeks ; dreading her Revolution, screaming at the prophecies of it, turning no hair when it was actually upon her ! Threaten an Englishman with imagination and he will quail indeed, face him with facts and nothing can shake his courage and dogged pugnacity. Imagination is the Achilles heel of the English character . . . after which great thought Henry discovered that he was last with his soup and every one was waiting for him.

Alicia Penrose carried the evening on her shoulders. She was superb. Her chatter gave every one what was needed — time to build up battlements round reality so that to-morrow should not be disgraced.

Tom Duncombe ably seconded her.

' Seen old Lady Adela lately ? ' he would ask.

' Adela Beaminster ? ' Alicia was greatly amused. ' Oh, but haven't you heard about her ? She's got a medium to live with her in her flat in Knightsbridge and talks to her mother every mornin' at eleven-fifteen.'

' What, the old Duchess ? '

' Yes. You know what a bully she was when she was alive—well, she's much worse now she's dead. Medium's Mrs. Bateson—you must have heard of her—Creole woman—found Peggy Nestle's pearl necklace for her last year, said it was at the bottom of a well in a village near Salisbury, and so it was. Of course she'd taken it first and put it there—all the same it did her an immense amount of good. Old Lady Adela saw her at somebody's

house and carried her off there and then. Now at eleven-fifteen every morning up springs the Duchess, says she's very comfortable in heaven, thank you, and then tells Adela what she's to do. Adela doesn't move a step without her. Did her best to get old Lord John in on it too, but he said "No, thank you." He'd had enough of his mother when she was alive, and he wasn't goin' to start in again now he was over eighty and is bound to be meeting her in a year or two anyway. Why, he says, these few days left to him are all he's got and he's not going to lose 'em. But Adela's quite mad. When you go and have tea with her, just as she's givin' you your second cup she says, "Hush! Isn't that mother?" Then she calls out in her cracked voice, "Is that you, mother darlin'?" then, if it is, she goes away and you never see your second cup . . .'

A sudden silence. Down every one goes, down into their own thoughts. About the house, in and out of the passages, through the doors and windows, figures are passing. Faces, pale and thin, are pressed against the window-panes. Into the dining-room itself the figures are crowding, turning towards the table, whispering, 'Do not desert us! Do not abandon us! We are part of you, we belong to you. You cannot leave the past behind. You must take us with you. We love you so, take us, take us with you!'

Alicia's voice rose again.

'But every one's a crank now, Charles. In this year of grace 1920 it's the only thing to be. You've got to be queer one way or t'other. That's why young Pomfret keeps geese in his flat in Parkside. He feeds them in a sort of

manger at the back of his dinin'-room. He likes them for their intelligence, he says. You've simply got to be queer or no one will look at you for a moment. That's why they started the Pyjama Society, Luxmoore and young Barrax, and some others. You have to swear that you'll never wear anythin' but pyjamas, and they've got special warm ones with fur inside for the cold weather. It's catchin' on like anythin'. It's so comfortable and economical too after the first expense. Then there's the Coloured Hair lot that Lady Bengin started—you all have to wear coloured wigs, green and purple and orange. You put on a new wig for luncheon just as you used to put on a new hat. There's a shop opened in Lover Street — Montague's — specially for these wigs. Expensive, of course, but not much more than a decent hat ! '

Closer the pale figures pressed into the room, smiling, wistfully watching, tenderly waiting for their host so soon now to join them.

' Do not leave us ! Do not forsake us ! We must go with you ! the beauty of life comes from us as well as from you, do not desert us ! We are your friends ! We love you ! '

' Well, I'm sure,' said Lady Bell-Hall, searching for her crystallised sugar at the bottom of her coffee cup, ' I never know whether to believe half the things you say, Alicia.'

' Ha, ha, ha ! ' laughed Tom Duncombe. ' You're right, Meg, don't you believe her. You stick to me.'

But as the two women went out of the room together one whispered to the other :

' You are kind, Alicia. . . . I'll never forget it.'

The next day was a wild one of wind and rain. Rain slashed the windows and spurted upon the lawns, died away into grey sodden clouds, burst forth again and was whirled by the wind with a noise like singing hail against the shining panes. The day passed without any incident. The normal life of the house was carried on. Henry worked in the library. Duncombe came in, found a book, went out again. The evening—the last evening—was upon them all with a startling suddenness. The women went up to their rooms; Charles Duncombe, his face grey and drawn, stopped Henry.

'Wait a minute,' he said. 'I'm going round the house for the last time. Come with me.'

He lit a candle and they started. The rain had died now to a comfortable purr. Into every room they went, the candle, raised high, throwing a splash of colour, making pools of flickering light.

The old bedroom near the Chapel seemed to hold Duncombe. He stood there staring, the candlestick steady in his hand, but his eyes staring as though in a dream.

He sat down on a chair near the four-poster.

'We'll stop here a moment,' he said to Henry. 'It's the least I can do for the old room. It knows I'm going. This was the bridal-chamber of the old Duncombes,' he said. 'Lady Emily Duncombe died in this room on her wedding-night. Heart failure. In other words, terror. . . . Poor little thing.

'And now I'm going to die too.' Henry said something in protest. 'Oh, of course there's a chance—a million-to-one chance. . . .' He looked up, smiling. 'I'll tell you one thing,

Henry. Pain, if you have much of it, makes death a most desirable thing. Pain! Why, I'd no idea at the beginning of what pain really was until this last year. Now I know. Many times I've wanted to die these last months, just before it comes on, when you know it's coming. . . . Pain, yes, I know something about that now.'

He had placed the candle on a table near to him. He raised it now above his head. 'Dear old room. I remember crawling in here when I was about three and hiding from my nurse. They couldn't find me for ever so long. . . . And now it's all over.'

Henry said, 'Not over if you've cared for it.'

'By Jove, there's something in that,' Duncombe answered. 'And I depend on you to carry it on. It's strange how my thoughts have centred round you these last weeks. If I get through this by good fortune I'll talk to you a bit, tell you things I've never told a living soul. I've always been alone all my life, not because I wanted to be, but just because I'm English. I've seen other men look at me just as I've looked at them, as though they longed to speak, but their English education wouldn't let them lest they should make fools of themselves. Then human beings have seemed to me so disappointing, so weak, so foolish. Not that I've thought myself any better. No, indeed. But we're a poor lot, there's no doubt about it.

'You're honest, Henry, and loyal and affectionate. Stick to those three things for all you're worth. You've been born into a wonderful time. Make something of it. Don't be passive. Throw yourself into it. And take all this with you. Make the past and the present and the future one. Join

them all together for the glory of God—and sometimes think of your old friend who loves you.'

He came across to Henry, kissed him on the forehead, and patted him on the shoulder.

'I'm tired,' he said, 'damned tired. These haven't been easy weeks.'

Henry said: 'I think you're going to come through. If you do, it will be wonderful for me. If you don't, I'll never forget you. I'll think of you always. I'll try to do as you say.'

Duncombe smiled. 'Look after my sister. Bring out the book with a bang. We'll meet again one day.'

Henry saw the candle-light trail down the passage and disappear. He fumbled his way to his room.

Next morning Charles Duncombe went up to London. There was no sign of emotion at his departure; it was as though he would be back before they could turn round. He was his dry, cynical self. He merely nodded to Henry, looking at him a little sternly before he climbed into the car. 'I'll see that Spencer sends you those notes,' he said. 'Meanwhile you'd better be getting on with that Ballantyne press.' He nodded, still sternly, smiled with his accustomed irony at his sister, and was gone.

Tom Duncombe and Alicia Penrose disappeared then for the day, rattling over in a very ancient hired taxi to see the Seddons, who were living just then some thirty miles away. Henry tried to fling himself into his work; manfully he sat in the little library driving through the intricacies of Ballantyne finances, striving desperately to lose himself in that old Edinburgh atmosphere and

friendly company. It could not be done. He saw, stalking towards him across the leaf-sodden lawn, the harshest melancholy that his young life had ever known. He had faced before now his unhappy times—in his younger years he had rebelled and sulked and made himself a curse to every one around him ; he was growing older now. He was becoming a man, but the struggle was none the easier because he was learning how to deal with it.

He gave up his work, stared out for a little on to the grass pale under a thin autumn sun, then felt that he must move about or die. . . .

He went out into the hall ; the whole place seemed deserted and dead ; the hall door was open, and from far away came the dim creaking of a cart. A little, chill, autumnal wind blew a thin eddy of leaves a few paces into the hall. Suddenly he heard a sound—some one was crying. Like any boy he hated above everything to hear a grown person cry. His immediate instinct was to run for his life. Then he was drawn against his will but by his natural instincts of tenderness and kindness towards the sound. He pushed back the drawing-room door that was ajar and looked into the room. Lady Bell-Hall was sitting there, crumpled up on the sofa, her head in her arms, crying desperately.

He knew that he should go away ; the English instinct deep in him that he must not make a fool of himself warned him that she did not like him, that she had never liked him, and that she would hate that he above all people should see her in this fashion. There was nevertheless something so desolate and lonely in her unhappiness that he could not go. He stood there for a moment, then very gently

closed the door. She heard the sound and looked up. She saw who it was and hurriedly sat erect, tried to assume dignity, rolling a handkerchief nervously between her hands and frowning. . . .

'Well,' she said in a strange little voice with a crack and a sob in it, 'what is it?'

'I beg your pardon,' he stammered. 'I wondered—I was thinking—that perhaps there was something——'

'No,' she answered hurriedly, not looking at him. 'Thank you. There's nothing.'

She sniffed, blew her nose, then suddenly began to sob again, turning to the mantelpiece, leaning her head upon her arms.

He waited, seeing such incongruous things as that a grey lock of hair had escaped its pins and was trailing down over the black silk collar of her blouse, that Pretty One was fast asleep, snoring in her basket, undisturbed by her mistress's grief, that last week's *Spectator* had fallen from the table on to the floor, that the silver calendar on the writing-table asserted that they were still in the month of May whatever the weather might pretend.

He came nearer to her. 'I do want you to know,' he said, blushing awkwardly, 'how I understand what you must be feeling and that I myself feel some of it too.'

She turned round at him, looked at him with her short-sighted eyes as though she were seeing him for the first time, then sat down again on the sofa.

'You do think he's going to get well, don't you?' she said suddenly. 'This isn't serious, this operation, is it? Tell me, tell me it isn't.'

He lied to her because he knew that she knew that he was lying and that she wanted him to lie.

'Of course he's going to come through it,' he said. 'And be better than he's ever been in his life before. Doctors are so wonderful now. They can do anything.'

'Oh, I do hope so! I do indeed! He wouldn't let me go up with him, although I did want to be there. I nursed my dear husband through three terrible illnesses, so I have *much* experience. . . . But I'm going up to-morrow to Hill Street to be near in case he should need me.'

She blinked at Henry, then patted the sofa.

'Come and sit here and talk to me. . . . It is very kind of you to speak as you do.'

Henry sat down. She looked at him more closely. 'I wish I liked you better,' she said. 'I have tried very hard to. Charles likes you so much and says you're so clever.'

'I'm sorry you don't like me, Lady Bell-Hall,' said Henry. 'I would do anything in the world for your brother. I think he's the finest man I have ever known.'

This set Lady Bell-Hall sobbing again. 'He is! Oh, he is! Indeed he is!' she cried, waving one little hand in the air while with the other she wiped her eyes. 'No one can know as well as I how kind he is and good . . . and it's so wicked . . . when he's so good—that they should take away his money and his house that he loves and has always been in the family and give it to people who aren't nearly so good. Why do they do it? What right have they——?' She broke off, looking at him with sudden suspicion. 'Oh, I suppose it all seems right to you,' she said. 'You're the new generation, I suppose that's why I don't like you. I don't like the new generation.

All you boys and girls are irreligious and immoral and selfish. You don't respect your parents and you don't believe in God. You think you know everything and you're hard-hearted. The world has become a terrible place, and the wrath of God will surely be called down upon it.'

Henry said quietly :

'After a war like the one there's just been it always takes a long time to settle down, doesn't it? And all the young generation aren't as you say. For instance, I have a splendid sister who is as modern as anybody, but she isn't immoral and she isn't hard-hearted and she doesn't think she knows everything. I think many girls now are fine, with their courage and independence and honesty. Hypocrisy is leaving England at last. It's been with us quite long enough.'

Lady Bell-Hall shook her head. 'I daresay you're right. I'm sure I don't know, I don't understand any of you. I'm lost in this new world. The sooner I die the better.' She got up and walked with great dignity across the room. She looked back at Henry rather wistfully. 'You do seem a kind young man, and Charles is very fond of you. I don't want to be unjust. I don't indeed!' She suddenly put up her hand and realised the escaping lock of hair. She cried, 'Oh, dear!' in a little frightened whisper, then hurried from the room.

Henry waited a little, then, feeling his own loneliness and desolation in the chilly place, broke out into the garden. He wandered down the paths until he found himself in a little rough-grassed orchard that hung precariously on the bend of the hill, above a little trout-stream and a clumsy, chattering water-mill.

Under the bare trees he stood and stared at himself. As a boy the principal note in his character perhaps had been his suspicion of human nature, and his suspicion of it especially in its relation to himself. The War, his life in London, his close intimacy with Peter and Millie had robbed him of much of this, but these influences had not brought him to that stage of sophistication that would establish him upon such superiority that he need never be suspicious again. He would in all probability never become sophisticated. There was something naïf in his character that would accompany him to his grave ; he was none the worse for that.

And it was this very naïveté that Lady Bell-Hall had just roused. As he walked in the orchard he was miserable, lonely, self-distrustful. He seemed to be deserted of all men. Christina was far far away. Millie and Peter did not exist. His work was nothing. He was out of tune with the universe. He felt behind him the house, the lands, the country falling into ruin. His affection for Duncombe, his master, was affronted by the vision of brother Tom, flushed and eager, selling his family for thirty pieces of silver. He and his generation could assist only at the breaking of the old world, not at the making of the new. . . .

He looked up and saw between the leafless branches of the trees the sky shredding into lines of winged and fleecy little clouds that ran in cohorts across a sky suddenly blue. The wind had fallen ; there was utter stillness. The sun, itself invisible, suddenly with a royal gesture flung its light in sheets of silver across the brown tree-trunks, the thick and tangled grass. The light was

so suddenly brilliant that Henry, looking up, was dazzled. It seemed to him that for an instant the sky was filled with shining forms.

He had the sense that he had known so often before that in another moment some great vision would be granted him.

He waited, his hand above his eyes, his heart suddenly flooded with happiness and reassurance. A little wind rose, a sigh ran through the trees, and drops of rain like glittering sparks from the sun touched his forehead. A shadow ran along the ground as though from the sweep of a giant's wing.

Strangely comforted he walked back to the house.

Next morning, in the company of Lady Bell-Hall, Lady Alicia, and Tom Duncombe, he left for Hill Street.

CHAPTER VIII

HERE COURAGE IS NEEDED

Victoria Platt was seated in her little dressing-room surrounded with fragments of coloured silk. She was choosing curtains for the dining-room. She was not yet completely dressed, and a bright orange wrapper enfolded her shapeless body. Millie stood beside her.

'I know you like bright colours, my Millie,' she said, 'so I can't think what you can object to in this pink. I think it's a pet of a colour.'

'Pink isn't right for a dining-room,' said Millie. (She had not slept during the preceding night and was feeling in no very amiable temper.)

'Not right for a dining-room?' Victoria repeated. 'Why, Major Mereward said it was just the thing.'

'You know perfectly well,' answered Millie, 'that in the first place Major Mereward has no taste, and that secondly he always says whatever you want him to say.'

'No taste! Why, I think his taste is splendid! Certainly he's not artistic like Mr. Bennett, who may be said to have a little too much taste sometimes——

'But, dear me, that was a lovely dinner he gave

us at the Carlton last night. Now, wasn't it? You can't deny it although you *are* prejudiced——'

'That *you* gave, you mean,' Millie snorted. 'Yes, I daresay he likes nothing better than ordering the best dinners possible at other people's expense. He's quite ready, I'm sure, to go on doing that to the end of his time.'

Victoria forgot her silks and looked up at her young friend.

'Why, Millie, what *has* come to you lately? You're not at all as you used to be. You're always speaking contemptuously of people nowadays. And you're not looking well. You're tired, darling——'

'Oh, I'm all right,' Millie moved impatiently away. 'You know I hate that man. He's vulgar, coarse, and selfish.'

Victoria was offended.

'You've no right to speak of my friends that way. . . . But I'm not going to be cross with you. No, I'm not. You're tired and not yourself. Dr. Brooker was saying so only yesterday.'

'There's no reason for Dr. Brooker to interfere. When I want his advice I'll ask for it.'

Victoria looked as suddenly distressed as a small child whose doll has been taken away.

'I can't make you out, Millie. There's something making you unhappy.

She looked up with a touching, anxious expression at the girl, whose face was dark with some stormy trouble that seemed only to bring out her loveliness the more, but was far indeed from the happy careless child Victoria had once known.

Millie's face changed. She suddenly flung herself down at her friend's feet.

'Victoria, darling, I don't want you to marry

that man. No, I don't, I don't indeed. He's a bad man, bad in every way. He only wants your money : he doesn't even pretend to want anything else. And when he's got that he'll treat you so badly that you'll be utterly wretched. You know yourself you will. Oh, don't marry him, don't, don't, don't ! '

Victoria's face was a curious mixture of offended pride and tender affection.

' There, there, my Millie. Don't you worry. Whoever said I was going to marry him ? At the same time it isn't quite true to say that he only cares for my money. I think he has a real liking for myself. You haven't heard all the things he's said. After all, I know him better than you do, Millie dear, and I'm older than you as well. Yes, and you're prejudiced. You never liked him from the first. He has his faults, of course, but so have we all. He's quite frank about it. He's told me his life hasn't been all that it should have been, but he's older now and wiser. He wants to settle down with some one whom he can really respect.'

' Respect ! ' Millie broke out. ' He doesn't respect any one. He's an adventurer. He says he is. Oh, don't you see how unhappy you'll be ? You with your warm heart. He'll break it in half a day.'

Victoria sighed. ' Perhaps he will. Perhaps I'm not so blind as you think. But at least I'll have something first. I've been an old maid so long. I want—I want——' She brushed her eyes with her hand. ' It's foolish a woman of my age talking like this—but age doesn't, as it ought, make as much difference.'

'But you can have all that,' Millie cried. 'The Major's a good man, and he does care for you, and he'd want to marry you even though you hadn't a penny. I know he seems a little dull, but we can put up with people's dulness if their heart's right. It seems to me just now,' she said, staring away across the little sunlit room, 'that nothing matters in a man beside his honesty and his good heart. If you can't trust——'

Victoria felt that the girl was trembling. She put her arms closer around her and drew her nearer.

'Millie, darling, what's the matter? Tell me. Aren't you happy? Tell me. I can't bear you to be unhappy. What does it matter what happens to a silly old woman like me? I've only got a few more years to live in any case. But you, so lovely, with all your life in front of you. . . . Tell me, darling——'

Millie shivered. 'Never mind about me, Victoria. Things aren't easy. He won't tell me the truth. I could stand anything if only he wouldn't lie to me. I ought to leave him, I suppose—give him up. But I love him—I love him so terribly.'

She did, what was so rare with her, what Victoria had never seen her do before, she burst into a passion of tears, sobbing—'I love him—and I oughtn't to—and every day I love him more.'

'Oh, my dear—I'm afraid it is a great deal my fault. I should have stopped it before it went so far—but indeed I never knew that it was on until it was over. And I liked him—I see now that I was wrong, but I'm not perhaps very clever about people——'

'No, no,' Millie jumped to her feet. 'You're not to say a word against him. You're not indeed.

It's myself who's to blame for things being as they are. I should have been stronger and forced him to take me to his mother. I despise myself. I who thought I was so strong. But we quarrel, and then I'm sorry, and then we quarrel again.'

She smiled, wiping her eyes. 'Dear Victoria, I'm not so fine as I thought myself—that's all. You see I've never been in love before. It will come right. It must come right——'

She bent forward and kissed her friend.

'I'll go down now and get on with those letters. You're a darling—too good to me by far.'

'I'm a silly old woman,' Victoria said, shaking her head. 'But I do wish you liked the pink, Millie dear. It will be so nice at night with the lights—so gay.'

'We'll have it, then,' said Millie. 'After all, it's your house, isn't it?'

She went downstairs, and then to her amazement found Bunny waiting for her near her desk.

'Why——' Her face flushed with pleasure. How could she help loving him when every inch of him called to her, and touched her with pity and pride and longing and wonder?

'I've come,' he began rather sulkily, not looking at her but out of the window, 'to apologise for last night. I shouldn't have said what I did. I'm sorry.'

How strange that now, when only a moment ago she had loved him so that most likely she would have died for him, the sound of his sulky voice should harden her with a curious, almost impersonal hostility.

'No need to apologise,' she said lightly, sitting down at her desk and turning over the letters.

'You weren't very nice last night, but last night's last night and this morning's this morning.'

'Oh, well,' he said angrily, still not looking at her, 'for the matter of that you weren't especially charming yourself; but of course it's always my fault.'

'Need we have it all over again?' she said, her heart beating, her head hot, as though some one were trying to enclose it in a bag. 'If I was nasty I'm sorry, and you say you're sorry—so that's over.'

He turned towards her angrily. 'Of course—if that's all you have to say——' he began.

The door opened and Ellen came in.

Millie had then the curious sensation of having passed through, not very long ago, the scene that was now coming. She saw Ellen's thin body, the faded, grey, old-fashioned dress, the sharply cut, pale face with the indignant, protesting eyes; she saw Bunny's sudden turn towards the door, his face hardening as he realised his old and unrelenting enemy, then the quick half-turn that he made towards Millie as though he needed her protection. That touched her, but again strangely she was for a moment outside this, a spectator of the sun-drenched room, of the silly pictures on the wall, of the desk with the litter of papers that even now she was still mechanically handling — outside it and beyond it, so that she was able to say to herself, 'And now Ellen will move to that far window, she'll brush that chair with her skirt, and now she'll say, "Good-morning, Mr. Baxter. I won't apologise for interrupting because I've wanted this chance——"'

'Good-morning, Mr. Baxter,' Ellen said, turning

from the window towards them both with the funny jerky movement that was so especially hers. 'I won't apologise for interrupting because I've wanted this chance of speaking to you both together for some time.'

Then, at the actual sound of her voice, Millie was pushed in, right in—and with that immersion there was a sudden desperate desire to keep Ellen off, not to hear on any account what she had to say, to postpone it, to answer Bunny's appeal, to do anything rather than allow things to go as she saw in Ellen's eyes that she intended them to go.

'Leave us alone for a minute, Ellen,' she said. 'Bunny and I are in the middle of a scrap.'

Standing up by the desk she realised the power that her looks had upon Ellen—her miserable, wretched looks that mattered nothing to her, less than nothing to her at all. She did not realise, though, that the tears that she had been shedding in Victoria's room had given her eyes a new lustre, that her cheeks were touched to colour by her quarrel with Bunny, and that she stood there holding herself like a young queen—young indeed both in her courage and her fear, in her loyalty and her scorn.

Ellen stared at her as though she were seeing her for the first time.

'Oh, well—' she said, suddenly dropping her eyes and turning as though she would go. Then she stopped. 'No, why should I? After all, it's for your good that you should know . . . this can't go on. I care for you enough to see that it shan't.'

Millie came forward into the centre of the room that was warm with the sun and glowing with light. 'Look here, Ellen. We don't want a scene. I'm

sick of scenes. I seem to have nothing but scenes now, with Bunny and you and Victoria and every one. If you've really got something to say, say it quickly and let's have it over.'

Bunny's contribution was to move towards the door. 'I'll leave you to it,' he said. 'Lord, but I'm sick of women. One thing after another. You'd think a man had nothing better to do——'

'No, you don't,' said Ellen quickly. 'You'll find it will pay you best to stay and listen. It isn't about nothing this time. You've *got* to take it. You're caught out at last, Mr. Baxter. I don't want to be unfair to you. If you'll promise me on your word of honour to tell Millie everything from first to last about Miss Amery, I'll leave you. If afterwards I find you haven't, I'll supply the missing details. Millie's got to know the truth this time whatever she thinks either of me or of you.'

Bunny stopped. His face stiffened. He turned back.

'You dirty spy!' he said. 'So you've been down to my village, have you?'

'I have,' said Ellen. 'I've seen your mother and several other people. Tell Millie the truth and my part of this dirty affair is over.'

Millie spoke: 'You've seen his mother, Ellen? What right had you to interfere? What business was it of yours?'

'Oh, you can abuse me,' Ellen answered defiantly. 'I'm not here to defend myself. Anyway you can't think worse of me than you seem to. I waited and waited. I thought some one else would do something. I knew that Victoria had heard some of the stories and thought that she would take some steps. I thought that you would

yourself, Millie. I fancied that you'd be too proud to go on month after month in the way you have done, putting up with his lies and shiftings and everything else. At last I could stand it no longer. If no one else would save you I would. I went down to his village in Wiltshire and got the whole story. I told his mother what he was doing. She's coming up to London herself to see you next week.'

Millie's eyes were on Bunny and only on him in the whole world. She and he were enclosed in a little room, a burning, sun-drenched room that grew with every moment smaller and closer.

'What *is* this, Bunny,' she said, 'that she means? Now at last we'll have the whole story, if you don't mind. What *is* it that you've been keeping from me all these months?'

He laughed uneasily. 'You're not going to pay any attention to a nasty jealous woman like that, Millie,' he said. 'We all know what *she* is and why she's jealous. I knew she'd been raking around for ever so long, but I didn't think that even her spite would go so far——'

'But what *is* it, Bunny?' Millie quietly repeated.

'Why, it's nothing. She's gone to my home and discovered that I was engaged last year to a girl there, a Miss Amery. We broke it off last Christmas, but my mother still wants me to marry her. That's why it's been so difficult all these weeks. But——'

'So you're not going to tell her the truth,' interrupted Ellen. 'I thought you wouldn't. I just thought you hadn't the pluck. Well, I will do it for you.'

'It's lies—all lies, Millie—whatever she tells you,' Bunny broke in. 'Send her away, Millie.

What has she to do with us? You can ask me anything you like, but I'm not going to be cross-questioned with her in the room.'

Millie looked at him steadily, then turned to Ellen.

'What is it, Ellen, you've got to say? Bunny is right, you've been spying. That's contemptible. Nothing can justify it. But I'd like to hear what you *think* you've discovered, and it's better to say it before Mr. Baxter.'

Ellen looked at Millie steadily. 'I'm thinking only of you, Millie. Not of myself at all. You can hate me ever afterwards if you like, but one day, all the same, you'll be grateful—and you'll understand, too, how hard it has been for me to do it.'

'Well,' repeated Millie, scorn filling every word, 'what is it that you think you've discovered?'

'Simply this,' said Ellen; 'that last autumn a girl in Mr. Baxter's village, the daughter of the village schoolmaster—Kate Amery is her name—was engaged secretly to Mr. Baxter. She is to have a baby in two months' time from now, as all the village knows. All the village also knows who is its father. Mr. Baxter has promised his mother to marry the girl. His mother insists on this, and, until I told her, she had no idea that he was involved with any one else.'

'A nice kind of story,' Bunny broke in furiously. 'Just what any old maid would pick up if she went round with her nose in the village mud. It's true, Millie, that I was engaged to this girl last year, and then at Christmas-time we saw that we were quite unsuited to one another and we broke it off.'

'Is it true,' asked Millie quietly, 'that your mother says you're to marry her?'

'My mother's old-fashioned. She thinks that I'm pledged in some way. I'm not pledged at all.'

'Is it true that the village thinks that you're the father of this poor girl's child?'

'I don't know what the village thinks. They all hate me there, anyway. They'd say anything to hurt me. Probably this woman's been bribing them.'

'Oh, poor girl! How old is she?'

'I don't know. Nineteen. Twenty.'

'Oh, poor, poor girl! . . . Did you promise your mother that you would marry her?'

'I had to say something. I haven't a penny. My mother would cut me off absolutely if I didn't promise.'

'And you've known all this the whole summer?'

'Of course I've known it.'

'And not said a word to me?'

'I've tried to tell you. It's been so difficult. You've got such funny ideas about some things. I wasn't going to lose you.'

Something he saw in Millie's face startled him. He came nearer to her. They had both completely forgotten Ellen. She gave Millie one look, then quietly left the room.

'But you must understand, Millie,' he began, a new note of almost desperate urgency in his voice. 'I've been trying to tell you all the summer. I don't love this girl and she doesn't love me. It would be perfectly criminal to force us to marry. She doesn't want to marry me. I swear she doesn't. I don't know whose child this is——'

'Could it be yours?'

'There's another fellow——'

'Could it be yours?'

'Yes, if you want to know, it could. But she hates me now. She says she won't marry me—she does really. And this was all before I knew you. If it had happened after I knew you, it would be different. But you're the only woman I've ever loved, you are truly. I'm not much of a fellow in many ways, I know, but you can make anything of me. And if you turn me down I'll go utterly to pieces. There's never been any one since I first saw you.'

She interrupted him, looking past him at the shining window.

'And that's why I never met your mother? That poor girl . . . that poor girl . . .'

'But you're not going to throw me over?'

'Throw you over?' She looked at him, wide-eyed. 'But you don't belong to me—and I don't belong to you. We've nothing to do with one another any more. We don't touch anywhere.'

He tried to take her hand. She moved back.

'It's no good, Bunny. It's over. It's all over.'

'No — don't — don't let me go like this. Don't——' Then he looked at her face.

'All right, then,' he said. 'You'll be sorry for this.'

And he went.

CHAPTER IX

QUICK GROWTH

MILLIE stayed beside the desk for a long time, turning the papers over and over, reading, as she long afterwards remembered, the beginning of one letter many times: 'Dear Victoria—If you take the 3.45 from Waterloo, that will get you to us in nice time for tea. The motor shall meet you at the station.'

'The motor shall meet you at the station. . . . The motor shall meet you at the station. . . .'

Well, and why shouldn't it? How easy for motors to meet trains—that is, if you *have* a motor. But motors are expensive these days, and then there is the petrol—and the chauffeur must cost something. . . . But that's all right if you can drive yourself—drive yourself. . . . She pulled herself up. Where was she? Oh, in Victoria's sitting-room. How hot the room was! And the beginning of October. How hot and how empty! Then, as though something cut her just beneath the heart, she started. She put her hand to her forehead. Her head was aching horribly. She would go home. She knew that Victoria would not mind.

Her only dominant impulse then was to be out of that house, that house that reminded her with

every step she took of something that she must forget—but what she must forget she did not know.

In the hall she found her hat and coat. Beppo was there.

'Beppo,' she said, 'tell Miss Victoria that I have a headache and have gone home. She'll understand.'

'Yes, miss,' he said, grinning at her in that especially confidential way that he had with those whom he considered his friends.

In the street she took a taxi, something very foreign to her economical habits. But she wanted to hide herself from everybody. No one must see her and stop her and ask her questions that she could not answer. And she must get home quickly so that she might go into her own room and shut her door and be safe.

In the sitting-room she found Mary Cass sitting at the table with a pile of books in front of her, nibbling a pencil.

'Hullo!' cried Mary. 'You back already?'

Then she jumped up, the book falling from her hand to the floor.

'Darling, what's the matter? . . . What's happened?'

'Why, do I look funny?' said Millie, smiling. 'There's nothing the matter. I've got an awful headache—that's all. I'm going to lie down.'

But Mary had her arms around her. 'Millie, what *is* it? You look awful. Are you feeling ill?'

'No, only my headache.' Millie gently disengaged herself from Mary's embrace. 'I'm going into my room to lie down.'

'Shall I get something for you? Let me——'

'Please leave me alone, Mary dear. I want to be left alone. That's all I want.'

She went into her bedroom, drew down the blinds, lay down on her bed, closing her eyes. How weak and silly she was to come home just for a headache, to give up her morning's work without an effort because she felt a little ill! Think of all the girls in the shops and the typists and the girl secretaries and the omnibus girls and all the others, they can't go home just because they have a headache—just because . . .

Mary Cass had come in and very quietly laid on her forehead a wet handkerchief with eau-de-Cologne. Ah! That was better! That was cool. She faded away down into space where there was trouble and disorder and pain, trouble in which she had some share but was too lazy to inquire what.

Then she awoke sharply with a jerk, as though some one had pushed her up out of darkness into light. The Marylebone church clock was striking. First the quarters. Then four o'clock very slowly. . . . She was wide awake now and realised everything. It was the middle of the afternoon and she had been asleep for hours. Her head was still aching very badly, but it did not keep her back now as it had done.

She knew now what had happened. She had seen the last of Bunny, the very, very last. She would never see him again, nor hear his voice again, nor feel his kiss on her cheek.

And at first there was the strangest relief. The matter was settled then, and that confusing question that had been disturbing her for so many months. There would be no more doubts about Bunny, whether he were truthful or no, why he did not

take her to his mother, whether he would write every day, and why a letter was suddenly cold when yesterday's letter had been so loving, why they had so many quarrels. . . . No, no more quarrels, no more of that dreadful pain in the heart and wondering whether he would telephone, or whether her pride would break first and she would speak to him. Relief, relief, relief—— Relief connected in some way with the little dancing circle of afternoon sunlight on the white ceiling, connected with the things on her dressing-table, the purple pincushion, the silver-backed brushes that Katherine had given her, the slanting sheet of looking-glass that reflected the end of her bed and the chair and the piece of blue carpet. Relief. . . . She turned over, resting her head on her hand, looking at the pearl-grey wall-paper. Relief! . . . and she would never see him again, never hear his voice again! Some one in the room with her uttered a sharp, bitter cry. Who was it? She was alone. Then the knife plunged deep into her heart, plunged and plunged again, turning over and over. The pain was so terrible that she put her hand over her eyes lest she should see this other woman who was there with her suffering so badly. No, but it was herself. It was she who would never see Bunny again, never hear his voice.

She sat up, her hands clenched, summoning control and self-command with all the strength that was in her soul. She must not cry, she must not speak. She must stare her enemy in the face, beat him down. Well, then. She and Bunny were parted. He did not belong to her. He belonged to that poor girl of whose baby he was the father.

She fought then, for twenty minutes, the hardest

battle of her life—the struggle for determination to face the facts. The facts were, quite simply, that she could never be with Bunny any more, and worse than that, that he did not belong to her any more but to another woman.

She had not arrived yet at any criticism of him—perhaps that would never be. When a woman loves a man he is a child to her, so simple, so young, so ignorant, that his faults, his crimes, his deceits are swallowed in his babyhood. Bunny had behaved abominably—as ill as any man could behave ; she did not yet see his behaviour, but when it came to her she would say that she should have been there to care for him and then it would never have been. She was to remember later, and with a desperate, wounding irony, how years before, when she had been the merest child and Katherine had been engaged to Philip, Henry had discovered that Philip had once in Russia had a mistress who had borne him a child.

Millie, when she had heard this, had poured indignant scorn upon the suggestion that Katherine should leave her lover because of this earlier affair. Had it not all had its history before Katherine had known Philip ? How ironic a parallel here ! Did not Millie's indignant, brave, fearless youth rise up here to challenge her ? No, that other woman had surrendered Philip long, long before. This woman . . . poor child—— Only nineteen and the village mocking her, waiting for her child with scorn and coarse gossip and taunting sneers !

She got up, bathed her face, her eyes dry and hot, her cheeks flaming, brushed her hair, and went into the sitting-room.

No one was there, only the evening sun like a

kindly spirit moving from place to place, touching all with gentle, tender fingers. Strange that she could have slept for so long ! She would never sleep again —never. Always would she watch,untouched, unmoved, that strange, coloured, leaping world moving round and round before her, moving for others, for their delight, their pain, but only for her scorn.

Mary Cass came in with her serious face and preoccupied air.

'Hullo, Mill ! Head better ?'

'Yes, thanks.'

'That's good. Had a sleep ?'

'Yes.'

'Splendid. . . . Lord, I've got plenty of work here. I don't know what they think we're made of. Talk about stuffing geese to get *foie gras* ! People say that's wicked. Nothing to what they do to us. Had any tea ?'

'No.'

'Want any ?'

'No, thanks.'

'Do your head good. But I daresay you're right. I'm going to have some, though.'

She moved about busying herself in her calm efficient way, lighting the spirit-lamp, getting out the cups, cutting the bread.

'Sure you won't have some ?'

'No, thanks.'

Tactful Mary was—none of that awful commiseration, no questions.

A good pal, but how far away, what infinite distance !

Millie took the book that was nearest to her, opened it and read page after page without seeing the words.

Then a sentence caught her.

'*Nor is it altogether the remembrance of her cathedral-stopping earthquakes; nor the stampedoes of her frantic seas; nor the tearlessness of arid skies that never rain. . . .*'

'*The tearlessness of arid skies that never rain?*' How strange a phrase! What was this queer book? She read on. '*Thus then the muffled rollings of a milky sea; the bleak rustlings of the festooned frosts of mountains; the desolate shiftings of the windrowed snows of prairies; all these, to Ishmael, are as the shaking of that buffalo robe to the frightened colt!*'

The murmuring of the wonderful prose consoled her, lulled her. She read on and on. What a strange book! What was it about? She could not tell. It did not matter. About the Sea. . . .

'What's that you're reading, Mill?'

She looked back to the cover.

'*Moby Dick.*'

'What a name! I wonder how it got here.'

'Perhaps Henry left it.'

'I daresay. He's always reading something queer.'

The comfortable little clock struck seven.

'You'd better eat something, you know.'

'No thank you, Mary.'

'Look here, Mill—you won't tell me what the trouble is?'

'Not now. . . . Later on.'

'All right. Sorry, old dear. But every trouble passes.'

'Yes, I know.'

She read on for an hour. The little clock struck eight.

She put the book down.

'I'll go to bed now, I think.'

'Right oh! Nothing I can get you?'

'No. I'm all right.'

'Shall I come and sleep with you?'

'Oh *no*!'

She crossed and kissed her friend, then quietly went to her room. She undressed, switched off the light, and lay on her back staring. A terrible time was coming, the worst time of all. She knew what it would be—Remembering Things. Remembering everything, every tiny tiny little thing. Oh, if that would only leave her alone for to-night, until to-morrow when she would endure it more easily. But now. They were coming, creeping towards her across the floor, in at the window, in at the door, from under the bed.

'I don't want to remember! I don't want to remember!' she cried.

Then they came, in a long endless procession, crowding eagerly with mocking laughter one upon another! That first day of all, when she had quarrelled with Victoria and she had come downstairs to find him waiting for her, when they had sat upon her boxes, his arm round her. When they had walked across the Park and he had given her tea. After their first quarrel, which had been about nothing at all, and he had sent her flowers, when he had caught her eye across the luncheon-table at Victoria's and they had laughed at their own joke, their secret joke, and Clarice had seen them and been so angry. . . . Yes, and moments caught under flashing sunlight, gathering dusk—moments at Cladgate, dancing in the hotel with the rain crackling on the glass above them, sudden movements of generosity and kindliness when his

face had been serious, grave, involved consciously in some holy quest . . . agonising moments of waiting for him, feeling sure that he would not come, then suddenly seeing him swing along, his eyes searching for her, lighting at the sight of her. . . . His hand seeking hers, finding it, hers soft against the cool strength of his . . . jokes, jokes known only to themselves, nicknames that they gave, funny points of view they had, 'men like trees walking,' presents, a little jade box that he had given her, the silver frame for his photograph, a tennis-racket. . . .

Oh, no, no, shut it out! I can't bear it any longer! If you come to me still I must go to him, find him, tell him I love him whatever it is that he has done, and that I will stay with him, be with him, hear his voice. . . .

She sat up, her hands to her head, the frenzy of another woman beating now in her brain. She did not know the hour nor the place; the world on every side of her was utterly still, you might hear the minutes like drops of water falling into the pool of silence. She saw it a vast inverted bowl gleaming white against the deep blue of the sky studded with stars. On the edge of this bowl she was walking perilously, as on a rope over space.

She had slept—but now she was awake, clear-headed, seeing everything distinctly, and what she saw was that she must go to Bunny, must find him, must tell him that she would never leave him again.

She was now so clear about it because the peril she saw in front of her was her loneliness. To go on, living for ever and ever in a completely empty world, walking round and round on that ridge above that terrible shining silence—could that be

expected of any one? No. Seriously she spoke aloud, shaking her head: 'I can't be supposed to endure that.'

She got out of bed and dressed very carefully, very cautiously, realising quite clearly that she must not wake Mary Cass, who would certainly stop her from going to find Bunny. Time did not occur to her, only she saw that the moonlight was shining into her room throwing milky splashes upon the floor, and these she avoided as though they would contaminate her, walking carefully around them as she dressed. She went softly into the sitting-room, softly down the stairs, softly into the street. She was wearing her little crimson hat because that was one that he liked.

She stayed for a moment in the street, marvelling at its coolness and silence. The night breeze touched her cheek, caressing her. Yes, the sky blazed with stars—blazed! And the houses were ebony black, like rocks over still deep water.

Everything around her seemed to give, at regular intervals, little shudders of ecstasy—a quiver in which she also shared. She walked down the street with rapid steps, her face set with serious determination. The sooner to reach Bunny! No one impeded her. It seemed to her that as she advanced the rocks grew closer about her, hanging more thickly overhead and shutting out the stars.

She was nearing the Park. There were trees, festoons above the water making dark patterns and yet darker shadows.

Under the trees she met a woman. She stopped and the woman stopped.

'You're out late,' the woman said; then as

Millie said nothing but only stared at her she went on, laughing affectedly—'Good evening—or morning I should say. It's nearly four.'

She stared at Millie with curiosity. 'Which way you going? I'm for home. Great Portland Street. Been back once to-night already. But I thought I'd make a bit more. Had no luck the second time.'

'Am I anywhere near Turner's Hotel?' Millie asked politely.

'Turner's Hotel, dear? And where might that be?'

'Off Jermyn Street.'

'Jermyn Street! You walk down Park Lane and then down Piccadilly. Are you new to London?'

'Oh, no, I'm not new,' said Millie very seriously. 'I couldn't sleep, so I came out for a walk.'

The woman looked at her more closely. She was a very thin woman with a short tightly-clinging skirt and a face heavily powdered.

'Here, we'd better be moving a bit, dear, or the bobby will be on us. You do look tired. I don't think I've seen you about before.'

'Yes, I *am* tired.'

'Well, so's myself if you want to know. But I've been working a bit hard lately. Want to save enough for a fortnight's holiday. Glebeshire. That's where I come from. Of course I wouldn't go back to my own place—not likely. But I'd like to see the fields and hedges again. Bit different from the rotten country round London.'

Millie suddenly stopped.

'It's very late to go now, isn't it?' she asked. 'In the middle of the night. He'll think it strange, won't he?'

'I should guess he would,' said the woman, tittering. 'Why, you're only a child. You've no right to be wandering about like this. You don't know what you're doing.'

'It was just because I couldn't sleep,' said Millie very gravely. 'But I see I've done wrong. I can't disturb him this hour of the night.'

She stumbled a little, her knees suddenly trembling. The woman put her arm around her. 'Steady!' she said. 'Here, you're ill. You'd better be getting home. Where do you live?'

'One Hundred and Sixteen Baker Street.'

'I'll take you. . . . There's a taxi. Why, you're nothing but a kid!'

In the taxi Millie leant her head on the woman's shoulder.

'I'm very tired but I can't sleep,' she said.

'You're in some trouble, I guess,' the woman said.

'Yes, I am. Terrible trouble,' said Millie.

'Some man, I suppose. It's always the men.'

'What's your name?' asked Millie. 'You're very kind.'

'Rose Bennett,' said the woman. 'But don't you remember it. I'm much better forgotten by a child like you. Why, I'm old enough to be your mother.'

The taxi stopped. Millie paid for it.

'Give me a kiss, will you?' asked the woman.

'Why, of course I will,' said Millie. She kissed her on the lips.

'Don't you go out alone at night like that,' said the woman. 'It isn't safe.'

'No, I won't,' said Millie.

She let herself in. The sitting-room was just as it had been, very quiet, so terribly quiet.

She had no thought but that she must not be alone. She opened Mary's door. She went in. Mary's soft breathing came to her like the voice of the room.

She took a chair and sat down and stared at the bed. . . . The Marylebone Church struck half-past seven and woke Mary. She looked up, staring, then in the dim light saw Millie sitting there.

'Why, Millie! You! All dressed. . . . Good heavens, what's the matter!'

She sprang out of bed.

'Why, you haven't even taken off your hat! Millie darling, what is it?'

'I couldn't sleep so I went out for a walk, and then I didn't want to be alone so I came in here.'

Mary gave her one look, then hurriedly throwing on her dressing-gown went into the next room, saying as she went:

'Stay there, Mill dear. . . . I'll be back in a moment.'

She carefully closed the door behind her, then went to the telephone.

'6345 Gerrard, please. . . . Yes, is that—? Yes, I want to speak to Mr. Trenchard, please—Oh, I know he's asleep. Of course, but this is very serious. Illness. Yes. He must come at once. . . . Oh, is that you, Henry? Sorry to make you come down at this unearthly hour. Yes—it's Mary Cass. You must come over here at once. It's Millie. She's very ill. No, I don't know what the matter is, but you must come. Yes, at once.'

She went back to Millie. She persuaded her to come into the sitting-room, to take off her hat.

After that, she sat there on the little sofa without moving, staring in front of her.

Half an hour later Henry came in, rough, tumbled, dishevelled. At the sight of that familiar face, that untidy hair, those eager devoted eyes, a tremor ran through Millie's body.

He rushed across to her, flung his arms around her.

'Millie, darling . . . darling. . . . What is it? Mill, dearest, what's the matter?'

She clung to him; she shuddered from head to foot; then she cried: 'Oh, Henry, don't leave me. Don't leave me. Never again. Oh, Henry, I'm so unhappy!'

And at that the tears suddenly came, breaking out, releasing at last the agony and the pain and the fear, pouring them out against her brother's face, clinging to him, holding him, never never to let him go again. And he, seeing his proud, confident, beloved Millie in desperate need of him, held her close, murmuring old words of their childhood to her, stroking her hair, her face, her hands, looking at her with eyes of the deepest, tenderest love.

BOOK IV

KNIGHT-ERRANT

CHAPTER I

MRS. JENSSEN'S MIND IS MADE UP AT LAST

At the very moment in the afternoon when Millie was hiding herself from a horrible world in a taxi, Henry and Lady Bell-Hall were entering the Hill Street house.

The house was still and unresponsive ; even Lady Bell-Hall, who was not sensitive to atmosphere, gave a little shiver and hurried upstairs. Henry hung up his coat and hat in the little room to the right of the hall and went to the library.

Herbert Spencer was there, seated at Sir Charles' table, surrounded with little packets of letters all tied neatly with bright new red tape. He was making entries in a large book.

'Ah, Trenchard,' he said, and went on with his entries.

Henry felt deeply depressed. Although the day was sunny and warm the library was cold. Spencer seemed most damnably in possession, his thin nose and long thin fingers pervading everything. Henry went to his own table, took his notes out of his despatch-box, and sat down. He had a sudden desire to have a violent argument with Spencer—about anything.

'I say, Spencer—you might at least ask how Sir Charles is.'

Spencer carefully finished the note that he was making.

'How is he?' he asked.

Henry jumped up and walked over to the other table.

'You're a cold-blooded fish!' he broke out indignantly. 'Yes, you are! You've no feelings at all. If he dies the only sensation you'll have, I suppose, is whether you'll still keep this job or no.'

Spencer said nothing but continued to write.

'Thank heaven I am inaccurate,' Henry went on. 'It's awful being as accurate as you are. It dries up all your natural feelings. There never was a warm-blooded man yet who was really accurate. And it's the same with languages. Any one who's a really good linguist is inhuman.'

'Indeed!' said Spencer, sniffing.

'Yes, indeed. . . .' retorted Henry indignantly. 'I think it's disgusting. Here's Duncombe, one of the finest men who ever lived. . . .'

'I can't help feeling,' said Spencer slowly, 'that one is best serving Sir Charles Duncombe's interests by carrying out the work that he has left in our charge. I may be wrong, of course.'

He then performed one of his most regular and most irritating habits—namely, he wiped a drop of moisture from his nose with the back of his hand.

'If you've made those notes on Cadell and Constable, Trenchard,' he added, 'during these last days in the country, I shall be very glad to have them.'

'Well, I haven't,' said Henry. 'So you can

put that in your pipe and smoke it. I haven't been able to concentrate on anything during the last two days, and I shan't be able to either until the operation's over.'

Spencer said nothing. He continued to work, then, as though suddenly remembering something, he opened a drawer and produced from it two sheets of foolscap paper thickly covered with writing.

'I believe this is your handwriting, Trenchard,' he said gravely. 'I found them in the waste-paper basket, where they had doubtless gone by mistake.'

Trenchard took them and then blushed violently. The top of the first page was headed:

'Chapter XV. The Mystery of the Blue Closet.'

'Thanks,' he said shortly, and took them to his own table.

There was silence for a long time while Henry, lost in a miserable vague dream, gazed with unperceptive eyes at the portrait of the stout, handsome Archibald Constable. Then came the luncheon-bell, and after that a quite horrible meal alone with Lady Bell-Hall, who only said two things from first to last. One: 'The operation's to be on Tuesday morning, I understand.' The other: 'I see coal's gone up again.'

After luncheon he felt that he could endure the terrible house no longer. He must get out into the air. He must try and see Christina.

Spencer returned from his luncheon just as Henry was leaving.

'Are you going?' he asked.

'Yes, I am,' said Henry. 'I can't stand this house to-day.'

'What about Cadell and Constable?' asked Spencer, sniffing.

'Damn Cadell and Constable,' said Henry, rushing out.

In the street he thought suddenly of Millie. He stopped in Berkeley Square thinking of her. Why? He had the strangest impulse to go off to Cromwell Road and see her. But Christina drew him.

Nevertheless Millie . . . but he shook his head and hurried off towards Peter Street.

I have called this a Romantic Story because it is so largely Henry's Story and Henry was a Romantic Young Man. He felt that it was his solemn duty to be modern, cynical, and realistic, but his romantic spirit was so strong, so courageous, so scornful of the cynical parts of him, that it has dominated and directed him to this very day, and will so continue to dominate, I suppose, until the hour of his death.

To many a modern young man Mrs. Jenssen would have been merely a nasty, dangerous, blackmailing woman, and Christina her pretty but possibly not-so-innocent-as-she-appears daughter. But there the young modern would have missed all the heart of the situation, and Henry, guided by his romantic spirit, went directly to it. He still believed in the evil, spell-brewing, hag-like witch, the dusky wood, the beautiful imprisoned Princess —nothing in the world seemed to him more natural —and for once, just for once, he was exactly right!

The Witch on this present occasion was, even thus early in the afternoon, taking a cup of tea with her friend Mrs. Armstrong. When Henry came in they were sitting close together, and their heads were turned towards the door as though they

had suddenly been discovered in some kind of conspiracy. Mrs. Jenssen tightened her thin lips when she recognised her visitor, and Henry realised that a new crisis had arrived in his adventure and that he must be prepared for a dramatic interview.

Nevertheless, from the moment of his entry into that room his depression dropped from him like the pack off Christian's back. Nothing was ever lost by politeness.

'Good afternoon, Mrs. Jenssen. Is Christina in?'

He stood in the doorway smiling at the two women.

Mrs. Jenssen finished her cup of tea before replying.

'No, she is not,' she at length answered. 'Nor is she likely to be. Neither now nor later—not to-day and not to-morrow.'

'What's he asking?' inquired Mrs. Armstrong in her deep bass voice.

'Whether Christina's in.'

Both the women laughed. It seemed to them an excellent joke.

'Perhaps you will be kind enough to give her a message from me,' Henry said, suddenly involved in the strange miasma of horrid smell and hateful sound that seemed to be for ever floating in that room.

'Perhaps I will not,' said Mrs. Jenssen, suddenly getting up from her chair and facing him. 'Now you've been hanging around here just about enough, and it will please you to take yourself off once and for all or I'll see that somebody makes you.' She turned round to Mrs. Armstrong. 'It's perfectly disgusting what I've had to put up with from him.

You'll recollect that first day he broke in here through the window just like any common thief. It's my belief it was thieving he was after then, and it's been thieving he's been after ever since. Damned little squab.

'Always sniffing round Christina, and Christina fairly loathes the sight of him. Why, it was only yesterday she said to me, "Well, thank God, mother, it's some weeks since we saw that young fool, bothering the life out of me," she said. 'Why, it isn't decent.'

'It is not,' said Mrs. Armstrong, blowing on her tea. 'I should have the police in if he's any more of a nuisance.'

'That's a lie,' said Henry, his cheeks flaming. Stepping forward, 'And you know it is. Where is Christina? What have you done with her? I'll have the police here if you don't tell me.'

Mrs. Jenssen thrust her head forward, producing an extraordinarily evil expression with her white powdered face, her heavy black costume, and her hanging podgy fingers. 'Call me a liar, do you? That's a nice pretty thing to call a lady, but I suppose it's about as much manners as you *have* got. He's always talking about the police, my dear,' turning round to Mrs. Armstrong. 'It's a mania he's got. Although what good they're going to do him I'm sure I don't know. And a pretty thing for Christina to be dragged into the courts. He's mad, my dear. That's all there is about it.'

'I'm not mad,' said Henry, 'as you'll find out one day. You're trying to do something horrible to Christina, but I'll prevent it if it kills me.'

'And let me tell you,' said Mrs. Jenssen, stand-

ing now, her arms akimbo, 'that if you set your foot inside that door again or bring your ugly dirty face inside this room I'll whip you out of it. I will indeed, and you can have as many of your bloody police in as you like to help you. All the police force if you care to. But I'll tell you straight,' here her voice rose suddenly into a violent scream, 'that I will bloody well scratch the skin off your face if you poke it in here again . . . and now get out or I'll make you.'

Here I regret to say Henry's temper, never as tightly in control as it should be, forsook him.

'And I tell you,' he shouted back, 'that if you hurt a hair of Christina's head I'll have you imprisoned for life and tortured too if I can. And I'll come here just as often as I like until I'm sure of her safety. You be careful what you do. . . . You'd better look out.'

He banged the door behind him and stumbled down the dark stairs.

CHAPTER II

HENRY MEETS MRS. WESTCOTT

In the street he had to pause and steady himself for a moment against a wall. He was trembling from head to foot, trembling with an extraordinary mixture of anger, surprise, indignation, and then anger again. Christina had warned him months ago that this was coming. 'When mother makes up her mind,' she said. Well, mother had made up her mind. And to what?

Where was Christina? Perhaps already she was being imprisoned in the country somewhere and could not get word to him—punished possibly until she consented to marry that horrible old man or some one equally disgusting.

The fear that he might now be too late—felt by him for the first time—made him cold with dread. Hitherto, from the moment when he had first seen the crimson feather in the Circus, he had been sure that Fate was with him, that the adventure had been arranged from the beginning by some genial, warm-hearted Olympian smiling down from his rosy-tipped cloud, seeing Henry Trenchard and liking him in spite of his follies, and determining to make him happy. But suppose, after all, it should not be so? What if Christina's life and

happiness were ruined through his own weakness and dallying and delay? He was so miserable at the thought that he started back a step or two half-determining to face the horrible Mrs. Jenssen again. But there was nothing at that moment to be gained there. He turned down Peter Street, baffled as ever by his own ridiculous inability to deal with a situation adequately. What was there lacking in him, what had been lacking in him from his birth? Good practical common sense, that was what he needed. Would he ever have it?

He decided that Peter was his need. He would put his troubles to him and do what he advised. Outside the upper part in Marylebone High Street he rang the little tinkly bell, and then waited an eternity. Nobody stirred. The house was dead. A grey, sleepy-eyed cat came and rubbed itself against his leg. He rang again, and then again.

Suddenly Peter appeared. He could not see through the dim obscurity of the autumn afternoon.

'Who's there?' he asked.

'It's me. I mean I. Henry.'

'Henry?'

'Yes, Henry. Good heavens, Peter, it's as difficult to pass your gate as Paradise's.'

Peter came forward.

'Sorry, old man,' he said. 'I couldn't see. Look here——' He put his hand on Henry's shoulder, hesitating. 'Oh, all right. Come in.'

'What! don't you want me?' said Henry, instantly, as always, suspicious of an affront. 'All right, I'll——'

'No, you silly cuckoo. Come in.'

They passed in, and at once Henry perceived

that something was different. What was different? He could not tell. . . .

He looked about him. Then in the middle of his curiosity the thought of his many troubles overcame him and he began:

'Peter, old man, I'm dreadfully landed. There's something that ought to be done and I don't know what it is. I never do know. It's Christina, of course. I've just had the most awful scene with her mother; she's cursed me like a fishwife and forbidden me to come near the house again. Of course I knew that this was coming, but Christina warned me that when it did come it would mean that her mother had finally made up her mind to something and wasn't going to waste any time about it. . . . Well, where's Christina, and how am I to get at her? I don't know what's happening. They may be torturing her or anything. That woman's capable of . . .'

He broke off, his eyes widening. The door from the inner room opened and a woman came out.

'Henry,' said Peter, 'let me introduce you. This is my wife.'

Henry's first thought was: 'Now I must show no surprise at this. I mustn't hurt Peter's feelings.' And his second: 'Oh dear! Poor thing! How terribly ill she looks!'

His consciousness of her was at once so strong that he forgot himself and Peter. He had never seen any one in the least like her before: this was not Peter's wife come back to him, but some one who had peered up for a moment out of a world so black and tragic that Henry had never even guessed at its existence. Not his experiences in the War, not his mother's death, nor Duncombe's

tragedy, nor Christina and her horrible parent, were real to him as was suddenly this little woman with her strange yellow hair, her large angry eyes, her shabby black dress. What a face!—he would never forget it so long as life lasted—with its sickness and anger and disgust and haggard rebellion.

Yes, there were worse things than the War, worse things than assaults on the body, than maiming and sudden death. His young inexperience took a shoot into space at that instant when he first saw Clare Westcott.

She stared at him scornfully, then she suddenly put her hand to her throat and sat down on the sofa with pain in her eyes and a stare of rebellious anger as though she were saying:

'I'll escape you yet. . . . But you're damned persistent. . . . Leave me, can't you?'

Peter came to her. 'Clare, this is Henry Trenchard—my best friend.'

Henry came across holding out his hand.

'How do you do? I'm very glad to meet you.'

She gave him her hand, it was hot and dry.

'So you're one of Peter's friends?' she said, still scornfully. 'You're much younger than he is.'

'Yes, I am,' he said. 'But that doesn't prevent our being splendid friends.'

'Do you write too?' she asked, but with no curiosity, wearily, angrily, her eyes moving like restless candles lighting up a room that was dark for her.

'I hope to,' he answered, 'but it's hard to get started—harder than ever it was.'

'Peter didn't find it hard when he began. Did you, Peter?' she asked, a curious note of irony in her voice. 'He began right away—with a great

flourish. Every one talking about him. . . . Didn't quite keep it up, though,' she ended, her voice sinking into a mutter.

'Never mind all that now,' Peter said, trying to speak lightly.

'Why not mind it?' she broke in sharply. 'That young man's your friend, isn't he? He ought to know what you were like when you were young. Those happy days. . . .' She laughed bitterly. 'Oh! I ruined his work, you know,' she went on. 'Yes, I did. All my fault. Now see what he's become. He's grown fat. You've grown fat, Peter, got quite a stomach. You hadn't one then or I wouldn't have married you. Are you married?' she said, suddenly turning on Henry.

'No,' he answered.

'Well, don't you be. I've tried it and I know. Marriage is just this: if you're unhappy it's hell, and if you're happy it makes you soft. . . .'

She seemed then suddenly to have said enough. She leant back against the cushion, not regarding any more the two men, brooding. . . .

There was a long silence.

Peter said at last: 'Are you tired, dear? Would you like to go and lie down?'

She came suddenly up from the deep water of her own thoughts.

'Oh, you want to get rid of me. . . .' She got up slowly. 'Well, I'll go.'

'No,' he answered eagerly. 'If you'll lie down on this sofa I'll make it comfortable for you. Then Henry shall tell us what he's been doing.'

She stood, her hands on her hips, her body swaying ever so slightly.

'Tum-te-tiddledy . . . Tum-te-tiddledy. Poor

little thing——! Was it ill? Must it be fussed over and have cushions and be made to lie down? If you're ever ill,' she said to Henry, 'don't you let Peter nurse you. He'll fuss the life out of you. He's a regular old woman. He always was. He hasn't changed a bit. Fuss, fuss—fuss, fuss, fuss. Oh! he's very kind, Peter is, so thoughtful. Well, why shouldn't I stay? I haven't seen so many new faces in the last few days that a new one isn't amusing. When did you first meet Peter?'

'Oh, some while ago now,' said Henry.

'Have you read his books?'

'Yes.'

'Do you like them?'

'Yes, I do.'

She suddenly lay back on the sofa and, to Henry's surprise, without any protest allowed Peter to wrap a rug round her, arrange the cushions for her. She caught his shoulder with her hand and pressed it.

'I used to like to do that,' she said, nodding to Henry. 'When we were married, years ago. Strong muscles he's got still. Haven't you, Peter? Oh, we'll be a model married couple yet.'

She looked at Henry, more gently now and with a funny crooked smile.

'Do you know how long we've been married? Years and years and years. I'm over forty, you know. You wouldn't think it, would you? . . . Say you wouldn't think it.'

'Of course I wouldn't,' said Henry.

'That's very nice of you. Why, he's blushing! Look at him blushing, Peter! It's a long time since I've done any blushing. Are you in love with any one?'

'Yes,' said Henry.

'When are you going to be married?'

'Never,' said Henry.

'Never! Why, doesn't she like you?'

'Yes, but she doesn't want to be married.'

'That's wise of her. It's hard on Peter my coming back like this, but I'm not going to stay long. As soon as I'm better I'm going away. Then he can divorce me.'

'Clare, dear, don't——'

'Just the same as you used to be.'

'Clare, dear, don't——'

'Clare, dear, you mustn't. . . . Oh, men do like to have it their own way. So long as you love a man you can put up with it, but when you don't love him any more then it's hard to put up with. How awful for you, Peter darling, if I'm never strong enough to go away—if I'm a permanent invalid on your hands for ever—— Won't that be fun for you? Rather amusing to see how you'll hate it—and me. You hate me now, but it's nothing to the way you'll hate me after a year or two. . . . Do you know Chelsea?'

'I've been there once or twice,' said Henry.

'That's where we used to live—in our happy married days. A dear little house we had—the house I ran away from. We had a baby too, but that died. Peter was fond of that baby, fonder than he ever was of me.'

She turned on her side, beating the cushions into new shapes. 'Oh, well, that's all over long ago—long, long ago.' She forgot the men again, staring in front of her.

Henry waited a little, then said a word to Peter and went.

CHAPTER III

A DEATH AND A BATTLE

Yes, life was now crowding in upon Henry indeed, crowding him in, stamping on him, treading him down. No sooner had he received one impact than another was upon him—— Such women as Clare, in regular daily life, in the closest connection with his own most intimate friend? As he hurried away down Marylebone High Street his great thought was that he wanted to do something for her, to take that angry tragedy out of her eyes, to make her happy. Peter wouldn't make her happy. They would never be happy together. He and Peter would never be able to deal with a case like Clare's, there was something too naïve, too childish in them. How she despised both of them, as though they had been curates on their visiting-day in the slums.

Oh, Henry understood that well enough. But didn't all women despise all men unless they were in love with them or wanted to be in love with them or had helped to produce them?

And then again, when you thought of it, didn't all men despise all women with the same exceptions? Clare's scorn of him tingled in his ears and made his eyes smart. And what she must have been through to look like that!

He dreamt of her that night ; he was in thick jungle and she, tiger-shaped, was hunting him and some one shouted to him, ' Look to yourself ! Climb into yourself ! The only place you're safe in ! '

But he couldn't find the way in, the door was locked and the window barred : he knew it was quiet in there and cool and secure, but the hot jungle was roaming with tigers and they were closer and closer. . . .

He woke to Mary Cass's urgent call on the telephone.

Then, when Millie was in his arms all else was forgotten by him—Clare, Christina, Duncombe, work, all, all forgotten. He was terrified that she should suffer like this. It was worse, far worse, than that he should suffer himself. All the days of their childhood—all the *tiniest* things—were now there between them, holding and binding them as nothing else could hold and bind.

Now that tears could come to her she was released and free, the strange madness of that night and day was over, and she could tell him everything. Her pride came back to her as she told him, but when he started up and wanted to go at once and find Baxter and drag him through the streets of London by the scruff of his neck and then hang him from the top of the Tower, she said : ' No, Henry dear, it's no use being angry. Anger isn't in this. I understand how it was. He's weak, Bunny is, and he'll always be weak, and he'll always be a trouble to any woman who loves him, but in his own way he did love me. But I'm not clear yet. It's been my fault terribly as well as his. I shouldn't have listened to Ellen, or if I did,

should have gone further. I would take him back, but I haven't any right to him. If he'd told me everything from the beginning I could have gone and seen his mother, I could have found out how it really was. Now I shall never know. But what I *do* know is that somehow he thought he'd slip through, and that if there *was* a way, he'd leave that girl to her unhappiness. If he could have found a way he wouldn't have cared how unhappy she was. He would be glad for her to die. I can't love him any more after that. I can't love him, but I shall miss all that that love was . . . the little things. . . .'

By the evening of that day she was perfectly calm. For three days he scarcely left her side—and he was walking with a stranger. She had grown in the space of that night so much older that she was now ahead of him. She had been a child ; she was now a woman.

She told him that Baxter had written to her and that she had answered him. She went back to Victoria. She was calm, quiet—and, as he knew, most desperately unhappy.

He had a little talk with Mary.

'She'll never get over it,' he said.

'Oh yes, she will,' said Mary. 'How sentimental you are, Henry !'

'I'm not sentimental,' said Henry indignantly. 'But I know my sister better than you know her.'

'You may know your sister,' Mary retorted, 'but you don't know anything about women. They must have something to look after. If you take one thing away, they'll find something else. It's their only religion, and it's the religion they want, not the prophets.'

She added : 'Millie is far more interested in life than I am. She is enchanted by it. Nothing and nobody will stop her excitement about it. Nobody will ever keep her back from it. She'll go on to her death standing up in the middle of it, tossing it around——

'You're like her in that, but you'll never see life as it really is. She will. And she'll face it all——'

'What a lot you think you know,' said Henry.

'Yes, I know Millie.'

'But she's terribly unhappy.'

'And so she will be—until she's found some one more unhappy than herself. But even unhappiness is part of the excitement of life to her.'

After a dreamless night he awoke to a sudden consciousness that Millie, Clare Westcott, and Christina were in his room. He stirred, raising his head very gently, and seemed to catch the shadow of Christina's profile in the grey light of the darkened window.

He sat up and, bending over to his chair where his watch lay, saw that it was nine o'clock. As he sprang out of bed, King entered with breakfast and an aggrieved expression. 'Knocked a *h*our ago, sir, and you hanswered,' he said.

'Must have been in my sleep then,' said Henry, yawning, then suddenly conscious of his shabby and faded pyjamas.

'Can't say, I'm sure, sir . . . knocked loud enough for anything. No letters this morning, sir.'

Henry was still at the innocent and optimistic age when letters are an excitement and a hope. He always felt that the world was deliberately, for

malicious and cruel reasons of its own, forgetting him when there were no letters.

He was splashing in his tin bath, his bony and angular body like a study for an El Greco, when he remembered. Tuesday—nine o'clock. Why? . . . What! . . . Duncombe's operation.

He hurried then as he had never hurried before, gulping down his tea, choking over his egg, flinging on his clothes, throwing water on his head and plastering it down, tumbling down the stairs into the street.

A clock struck the half-hour as he hastened into Berkeley Square. He had now no thought but for his beloved master; every interest in life had faded before that. He seemed to be with him there in the nursing home. He could watch it all, the summoning, the procession into the operating theatre, the calm, white-clad surgeon, the nurses, the anaesthetic. . . . His hand was on the Hill Street door-bell. He hesitated, trembling. The street was so still in the misty autumn morning, a faint scent in the air of something burning, of tar, of fading leaves. A painted town, a painted sky, and some figures in the foreground breathlessly waiting.

The old butler opened the door. He turned back as Henry entered, pointing to the dark and empty hall as though that stood for all that he could say.

'Well?' said Henry. 'Is there any news yet?'

'Sir Charles died under the operation. . . . Her ladyship has just been rung up——'

The old man moved away.

'I can't believe it,' he said. 'I can't believe it. . . . It isn't natural! Such a few good ones in the world. It isn't right.' He stood as though

he were lost, fingering the visiting-cards on the table. He suddenly raised dull imperceptive eyes to Henry. 'They can say what they like about new times coming and all being equal. . . . There'll be masters all the same, and not another like Sir Charles. Good he was, good all through.' He faded away.

Henry went upstairs. He was so lost that he stood in the library looking about him and wondering who that was at the long table. It was Herbert Spencer with his packets of letters and his bright red tape.

'Sir Charles is dead,' Henry said.

The books across that wide space echoed, 'Sir Charles is dead.'

Herbert Spencer looked at the letters in his hand, let them drop, glanced up.

'Oh, I say! I'm sorry! . . . Oh dear!' he got up, staring at the distant bookshelves. 'After the operation?'

'During it.'

'Dear, dear. And I thought in these days they were clever enough for anything.' He rubbed his nose with the back of his hand. 'Not much use going on working to-day, I suppose?'

Henry did not hear.

'Not much use going on working to-day, I suppose?' he repeated.

'No, none,' said Henry.

'You'll be carrying the letters on, I suppose?' he said.

'I don't know,' Henry answered.

'Well, you see, it's like this. I've got my regular work I'll have to be getting back to if this isn't going on. I was put on to this until it was

finished, but if it isn't going to be finished, then I'd like to know, you see——'

'Of course it's going to be finished,' said Henry suddenly.

'Well then——' said Herbert Spencer.

'And I'll tell you this,' said Henry, suddenly shouting, 'it's going to be finished splendidly too. It's going to be better than you can imagine. And you're going to work harder and I'm going to work harder than we've ever done in our lives. It's going to be the best thing that's ever been. . . . It's all we can do,' he added, suddenly dropping his voice.

'All right,' said Herbert Spencer calmly. 'I'll come to-morrow then. What I mean to say is that it isn't any use my staying to-day.'

'It's what he cared for more than anything,' Henry cried. 'It's got to be beautiful.'

'I'll be here to-morrow, then,' and Spencer gathered his papers together and went.

Henry walked round, touching the backs of the books with his hand. He had known that this would be. There was no surprise here. But that he would never see Sir Charles again nor hear his odd, dry, ironical voice, nor see his long nose raise itself across the table—that was strange. That was indeed incredible. His mind wandered back to that day when Duncombe had first looked at the letters and then, when Henry was expecting curses, had blessed him instead. That indeed had been a crisis in his life—a crisis like the elopement of Katherine with Philip, the outbreak of the War, the meeting with Christina—one of the great steps of the ladder of life. He felt now, as we all must feel when some one we love has gone, the burden of all

the kindness undone, the courtesy unexpressed, the tenderness untendered.

And then he comforted himself, still wandering, pressing with his hands the old leather backs and the faded gilding, with the thought that at the last, out there at Duncombe, Sir Charles had loved him and had spoken out the things that were really in his heart, the things that he would not have said to any one for whom he had not cared. That last night in Duncombe, the candle lighting the old room, Sir Charles had kissed him as he might his own dearly loved son. And perhaps even now he had not gone very far away.

Henry climbed the little staircase into the gallery and moved into the dusky corners. He came to the place that he always loved best, where the old English novelists were, Bage and Mackenzie and absurd Clara Reeve and Mrs. Opie and Godwin.

He took out *Barham Downs* and turned over the leaves, repeating to himself the old artificial sentences, the redundant moralising; the library closed about him, put its arms around him, and told him once again, as it had told him once before, that death is not the end, and that friendship and love know no physical boundaries.

Hearing a step he looked up and saw below him Lady Bell-Hall. She raised her little pig-face to the gallery and then waited, a black doll, for him to come down to her.

When he was close to her she said very quietly, 'My brother died under the operation.'

'Yes, I have heard,' Henry said.

She put out her hand and timidly touched him on the arm: 'Every one matters now for whom he

cared,' she said. 'And he cared for you very much. Only yesterday when I saw him in the nursing home he said how much he owed to you. He wanted us to be friends. I hope that we shall be.'

'Indeed, indeed, we will be,' said Henry.

'What I want,' she said, her upper lip trembling like a child's, 'is for every one to know how good he was—how wonderfully good! So few people knew him—they thought him stiff and proud. He was shy and reserved. But his goodness! There never was any one so good—there never will be again. *You* knew that. You felt it. . . . I don't know . . . I can't believe that we shall never—never again . . . see . . . hear . . .'

She began to cry, hiding her face in her handkerchief, and he suddenly, as though he were many years older than she, put his arm around her. She leant her head against him and he stood there awkwardly, longing to comfort her, not knowing what to say. But that moment between them sealed a friendship.

Nevertheless when he left the house he was in a curious rage with life. On so many occasions he himself had been guilty of spoiling life, and even in his worst moods of arrogance and ill-temper he had recognised that.

But often during the War he had seen cloven hoofs pushing the world, now here, now there, and had heard the laughter of the demons watching from their dusky woods. At such times his imagination had faded as the sunlit glow fades from the sky, leaving steel-grey and cold horizons all sharply defined and of a menacing reality.

In his imagination he had seen Duncombe depart, and the picture had been coloured with

soft-tinted promises and gentle prophecies—now in the harsh fact Duncombe was gone just as the letter-box stood in Hill Street and the trees were naked in Berkeley Square. Life had no right to do this, and even, so arrogantly certain are we all of our personalities, he felt that his desire should be important enough to defeat life's purpose.

Christina and her mother, Millie and her lover, Duncombe and his operation, what was life about to permit these things? How strongly he felt in his youth his own certainty of survival, but one cock of life's finger and where was he?

Well, he was in Piccadilly Circus, and once again, as many months before, he stopped on the edge of the pavement looking across at the winged figure, feeling all the eddy of the busy morning life about him, swaying now here, now there, like strands of coloured silk, above which were human faces, but impersonal, abstracted, like fish in a shining sea. The people, the place, then suddenly through his own anger and soreness and sense of loss that moment of expectation again when he rose gigantic above the turmoil, when beautiful music sounded. The movement, suddenly apprehensive, ceased; like God he raised his hand, the fountain swayed, the ground opened and——

Standing almost at his side, unconscious of him, waiting apparently for an omnibus, was Baxter.

At the sight of that hated face, seen by him before only for a moment but never to be forgotten, rage took him by the throat, his heart pounded, his hands shook; in another instant he had Baxter by the waistcoat and was shaking him.

'You blackguard! You blackguard! You blackguard!' he cried. Then he stepped back:

'Come on, you swine! You dirty coward! . . .' With his hand he struck him across the face.

At that moment Baxter must have been the most astonished man in England. He was waiting for his omnibus and suddenly some one from nowhere had caught him by the throat, screamed at him, smacked his cheek. He was no coward; he responded nobly, and in a whirl of sky, omnibuses, women, shop-windows and noise they were involved, until, slipping over the edge of the kerb, they both fell into the road.

Baxter, rising first, muttered, 'Look here! What the devil . . .' then suddenly realised his opponent.

They had no opportunity for a further encounter. A crowd had instantly gathered and was pressing them in. A policeman had his hand on Henry's collar:

'Now, then, what's all this?'

No one can tell what were Baxter's thoughts, the tangle of his emotions, regrets, pride, remorse, since that last scene with Millie. All that is known is that he pushed aside some small boy pressing up with excited wonder into his face, brushed through the crowd and was gone.

Henry remained. He stood up, the centre of an excited circle, the policeman's hand on his shoulder. His glasses were gone and the world was a blur; he had a large bump on his forehead, his breath came in confused, excited pants, his collar was torn. So suddenly had the incident occurred that no one could give an account of it. Some one had been knocked down by some one—or had some one fallen? Was it a robbery or an attempted murder? Out of the mist of voices and faces the large, broad

shoulders of the policeman were the only certain fact.

'Now, then, clear out of this. . . . Move along there.' The policeman looked at Henry; Henry looked at the policeman. Instantly there was sympathy between them. The policeman's face was round and red like a sun; his eyes were mild as a cow's.

Henry found that his hat was on his head, that he was withdrawn from the crowd, that he and the policeman together were moving towards Panton Street. Endeavours had been made to find the other man. There was apparently no Other Man. There had never been one, according to one shrill-voiced lady.

'Now what's all this about?' asked the policeman. His tone was fatherly and even affectionate.

'I—hit him,' said Henry, panting.

'Well, where is 'e?' asked the policeman, vaguely looking about him.

'I don't know. I don't care. You can arrest me if you like,' panted Henry.

'Well, I ought to give you in charge by rights,' said the policeman, 'but seeing as the other feller's 'ooked it— What did you do it for?'

'I'm not going to say.'

'You'll have to say if I take you to Bow Street.'

'You can if you like.'

The policeman looked at Henry, shaking his head. 'It's the War,' he said. 'You wouldn't believe what a number of seemingly peaceable people are knocking one another about. You don't look very savage. You'll have to give me your name and address.'

Henry gave it.

'Why, here's your lodging. . . . You seem peaceable enough.' He shook his head again. 'It don't do,' he said, 'just knocking people down when you feel like it. That's Bolshevism, that is.'

'I'm glad I knocked him down,' said Henry.

'You'd feel differently to-morrow morning after a night in Bow Street. But I know myself how tempting it is. You'll learn to restrain yourself when you come to my age. Now you go in and 'ave a wash and brush up. You need it.' He patted Henry paternally on the shoulder. 'I don't expect you're likely to hear much more of it.'

With a smile of infinite wisdom he moved away. Henry stumbled up to his room.

Perhaps he had been a cad to hit Baxter when he wasn't expecting it. But he felt better. His head was aching like hell. But he felt better. And to-morrow he would work at those letters like a fanatic. He washed his face and realised with pleasure that although it was only the middle of the morning he was extremely hungry. Millie—yes, he was glad that he had hit Baxter.

CHAPTER IV

MILLIE RECOVERS HER BREATH

On the next afternoon about four of the clock Millie was writing letters with a sort of vindictive fury at Victoria's desk. Beppo had just brought her a cup of tea ; there it stood at her side with the bread and butter badly cut as usual. But she did not care. She must WORK, WORK, WORK.

Like quicksilver were her fingers, her eyes flashed fire, the rain beat upon the windows, and the loneliness and desolation were held at bay.

The door opened and in came Major Mereward ; he looked as usual, untidy, with his hair tousled, his moustache ragged, and his trousers baggy — not a military major at all—but now a light shone in his eyes and his eyebrows gleamed with the reflection of it. He knew that Millie was his friend, and coming close to her and stammering, he said :

'Miss Trenchard. It's all right. It's all right. Victoria will marry me.'

Her heart leaped up. She was astonished at the keenness of her pleasure. She could then still care for other people's happiness.

'Oh, I am glad ! I am *glad* !' she cried,

jumping up and shaking him warmly by the hand. 'I never was more pleased about anything.'

'Well, now, that *is* nice—that's very nice of you. It will be all right, won't it? You know I'll do my best to make her happy.'

'Why, of course you will,' cried Millie. 'You know that I've wanted her to marry you from ever so long ago. It's just what I wanted.'

He set back his shoulders, looking so suddenly a man of strength and character that Millie was astonished.

'I know that I'm not very clever,' he said. 'Not in your sort of way, but cleverness isn't everything when you come to my time of life and Victoria's.'

'No, indeed, it isn't,' said Millie with conviction.

'I'm glad you think so,' he said, sighing so hastily that quite a little breeze sprang up. 'I thought you'd feel otherwise. But I know Victoria better than she thinks. I'm sure I shall make her happy.'

'I'm sure you will,' said Millie. They shook hands again. Mereward looked about him confusedly.

'Well, I mustn't keep you from your work. Hard at it, I see. Hum, yes. . . . Hard at it, I see,' and went.

Millie sat at her desk, her head propped on her hands. She wasn't dead, then? She drank her tea and smoked a cigarette. Not dead as far as others were concerned. For herself, of course, life was entirely over. She must drag herself along, like a wounded bird, until death chose to come and take her. The tea was delicious. She got up and looked at herself in the glass. She was wearing her old orange jumper to-day; she'd put it on just

because it was old and it didn't matter what she wore. Yes, it *was* old. Time to buy another one. There was one—a kind of purple—in Debenham & Freebody's window. . . . But why think of jumpers when her life was over? Only five days ago she had died, and here she was thinking of jumpers. Well, that was because she was so glad about Victoria. However finished your own personal life might be, that did not mean that you could not be interested in the lives of others. She loved Victoria, and it would have been horrible had she married that terrible Bennett. Now Victoria was safe and Millie was *glad*. She must find her and tell her so.

She found her, as she expected, in her bedroom. Victoria had been wonderful to her during those three days, using a tact that you never would have expected. She must have known what had occurred, but she had made no allusion to it, had not asked where He was, had watched over Millie with a tenderness and solicitude that, even though a little irritating, was very touching.

Now she sat in her bedroom armchair, still wearing her gay hat with peacocks' feathers; she was near laughter, nearer tears, and altogether in a considerable confusion. Millie flung her arms around her and kissed her.

'Well, now, you've got your way,' said Victoria, 'and I hope you're glad. If the marriage is a terrible failure it will be all your fault; I hope you realise your responsibility. It was simply because I couldn't go on being nagged by you any longer. Poor man. He did look so funny when he proposed to me, and when I said yes he just ran out of the room. He didn't kiss me or anything.'

'He's just mad with delight,' said Millie.

'Is he? Well, it's settled.' She sat up, pushing her hat straight. 'All my adventures are over, my Millie. It's a very sad thing, when you come to think of it. A quiet life for me now. It certainly wouldn't have been quiet with Mr. Bennett.'

'Now don't you go sighing over him,' said Millie. 'Make the most of your Major.'

'Oh, I shan't sigh after him,' said Victoria, sighing nevertheless. 'But it would be lovely to feel wildly in love. I don't feel wildly in love at all. Do you know, Millie mine, it's exactly what I feel if I want to buy a dress that's too expensive for me. Excited for days and days as to whether I will or I won't. And then I decide that I will and the excitement's all over. Of course I have the dress. But it isn't as nice as the excitement.'

'Perhaps the excitement will come with marriage,' said Millie, feeling infinitely old. 'It often does.'

'Now how ridiculous,' cried Victoria, jumping up, 'to talk of excitement at my age. I ought to be thankful that I can be married at all. I'm sure he's a good man. Perhaps I wish that he weren't quite so good as he is.'

'You wait,' said Millie; 'he may develop terribly after marriage. They often do. He may beat you and spend your money riotously and leave you for weeks at a time.'

'Oh, do you think so?' said Victoria, her cheeks flushing. 'That would be splendid. Just the risk of it, I mean. But I'm afraid there isn't much hope. . . .'

'You never know,' Millie replied. 'And now, dear, if you'll let me I'll be off. You'll find all

the letters answered in a pile on the desk waiting for you to sign. The one from Mr. Block I've left you to answer for yourself.' She paused. 'After your marriage you won't be wanting me any more, I suppose?'

'Want you! I shall want you more than ever. You darling! I'm never going to let you go unless you——' Here she felt on dangerous ground and ended, 'unless you want to go yourself, I mean.'

'No, you didn't mean that,' said Millie. 'What you meant was unless I marry. Well, you can make your mind easy—I'm never going to marry. Never! I'm going to die an old maid.'

'And you so beautiful!' cried Victoria. 'I don't think so,' and she threw her arms round Millie's neck and gave her one of those soft and soapy kisses that Millie so especially detested.

But on her way home she forgot the newly-engaged. The full tide of her own personal wretchedness swept up and swallowed her in dark and blinding waters. She had noticed that it was always like that. She seemed free—coldly, indifferently free—independent of the world, standing and watching with scorn humanity, and then of a sudden the waters caught at her feet, the tide drew her, the foam was in her eyes, and with agony she drowned in the flood of recollection, of vanished tenderness, of frustrated hope.

It was so now: she did not see the people with her in the Tube nor hear their voices. Only she saw Bunny and heard his voice and felt his cheek against hers.

Then there followed, as there always followed, the fight to return to him, not now reasoning nor

recalling any definite fact or argument, but only, as it had been that first night, the impulse to return, to find him again, to be with him and near him at all possible cost or sacrifice.

She was fighting her own misery, staring in front of her, her hands clenched on her lap, when she heard her name called. At first the voice seemed to call from far away : 'Millie ! Millie !' Then quite close to her. Some one sitting almost opposite to her was leaning forward and speaking to her. She raised her head out of her own troubles and looked and saw that it was Peter.

Peter ! The very sight of his square shoulders and thick resolute figure reassured her. Peter ! Strangely she had not actually thought of him in all this recent trouble, but the consciousness of him had nevertheless been there behind her. She smiled, her face breaking into light, and then, with that swift sympathy that trouble gives, she realised that he himself was unhappy. Something had happened to him, and how tired he was ! His eyes were pinched with grey lines, his head hung forward a little as though it was tumbling to sleep.

Just then Baker Street Station arrived and they got out together. He caught her arm and they went up in the lift together. They came out to a lovely autumn evening, the sky dotted with silver stars, and the wall of Tussaud's pearl-grey against the faint jade of the fading light. 'What's the matter, Millie ?' he asked. 'I haven't seen you for a fortnight. I was watching you before I spoke to you. You looked too tragic. What's up ?'

'I was going to ask you the same question,' she said.

'Oh, I'm only tired. Here, I'll walk with you

as far as your rooms. I want to get an evening paper anyway.'

'Only tired? What's made you?'

'I'll tell you in a minute. But tell me your trouble first. That is, if you want to.'

'Oh, my trouble!'—she shrugged her shoulders. 'Ordinary enough, Peter. But I don't think I can talk about it, if you don't mind—at least not yet. Only this. That I'm not engaged and I'm never going to be again. I'm a free woman, Peter.'

She felt then his whole body tremble against hers. For an instant his hand pressed against her side with such force that it hurt. Then he took his hand from her arm and walked apart. He walked in silence, rolling a little from leg to leg as was his way. And he said nothing. She waited. She expected him to ask some question. He said nothing. Then, when at last they were turning down into Baker Street, his voice husky, he said:

'My trouble is that my wife's come back.'

It took her some little while to realise that—then she said:

'Your wife?'

'Yes, after nearly twenty years. Of course I don't mean that *that's* a trouble. But she's ill—very ill indeed. She's very unhappy. She's had a terrible time.'

'Oh, Peter, I *am* sorry!'

'Yes, it's difficult after all this time—difficult to find the joining-points. And I'm not very good at that—clumsy and slow.'

'Is her illness serious? What is it?'

'Everything! Everything's the matter with her—heart and all. But that isn't her chief trouble. She's so lonely. Can't get near to anybody. It's

so difficult to help her. I'm stupid,' he repeated. They had come to Millie's door. They stood there facing one another in the dusk.

'Oh, I *am* sorry,' she repeated.

'Well, you must help me,' he suddenly jerked out, almost roughly. 'Only you can.'

'Help you? How?'

'Come and see her.'

'I? . . . Oh no!' Millie shrank back.

'Yes, you must. Perhaps you can talk to her. Make her laugh a little. Make her a little less unhappy.'

'I make any one laugh?'

'Yes. Just to look at you will do her good. Something beautiful. Something to take her out of herself——'

'Oh no, Peter, I can't. Please, please don't ask me.'

'Yes, yes, you must.' He was glaring at her as though he would strike her. 'Do you remember when we three were in Henry's room alone and we swore friendship? We swore to help one another. Well, this is a way you can help me. And you've got to do it.'

'Peter, don't ask me—just now——'

'Yes, now—at once. You have got to.'

Suddenly she submitted.

'Very well, then. But I'll be no good. I'm no use to any one just now.'

'When will you come?'

'Soon. . . .'

'No, definitely. To-morrow. What time?'

'Not to-morrow, Peter. The day after.'

'Yes, to-morrow. To-morrow afternoon. About five.'

'Very well.'

'I'll expect you.' He strode off. It was not until she was in her room that she realised that he had said no single word about her broken engagement.

CHAPTER V

AND FINDS SOME ONE WORSE OFF THAN HERSELF

Millie stood in Peter's room looking about her with uneasy discomfort. She was alone there : Peter, after greeting her, had gone into the bedroom. She felt that he was in there protesting and arguing with some one who refused a meeting. She hated him for putting her in so false a position. She was tired with her day's work. Victoria, now that she was engaged, allowed, nay encouraged, moods to sweep across her as swiftly as clouds traverse the sun. She would wait only a moment longer and then she would go. She had kept her word to Peter by coming. That was enough.

The door opened, and a little woman, a shawl around her shoulders, came out, moved to the sofa without looking at Millie, and lay down upon it. Peter followed her, arranged the cushions for her, drew a little table to her side and placed a cup and saucer upon it. Millie, in spite of herself, was touched by the careful clumsiness of his movements. Nevertheless she longed to do these things herself.

Peter turned to her. 'Clare, dear,' he said, 'I want you to know a very great friend of mine, Miss Trenchard. Millie, dear, this is my wife.'

Millie came over to the sofa, and in spite of

her proud self-control her heart beat with pity. She realised at that instant that here was a woman who had gone so far in life's experience beyond her own timid venturings that there could be no comparison at all between them. Her passionate love of truth was one of her finest traits ; one glance at Clare Westcott's face and her own little story faded into nothingness before that weariness, that anger, that indignation.

She took Clare's hand and then sat down, drawing a chair closer to the sofa. Peter had left the room.

'It's kind of you to come and see me,' Clare said indifferently, her eyes roaming about the room.

'Peter asked me,' said Millie.

'Oh, I know,' Clare said. 'Do come and see my poor wife. She's very ill, she hasn't long to live. She's had a very bad time. You'll cheer her up. Wasn't that it?'

Millie laughed. 'He said that you'd been ill and he'd like me to come and see you. But I believe it was more to do me good than you. I've been in a bit of trouble myself and have altogether been thinking too much about myself.'

Millie's laugh attracted Clare's attention. Her wandering glance suddenly settled on Millie's face.

'You're beautiful,' she said. 'I like all that bright colour. Purple suits you, and you wear your clothes well, too, which hardly any English girls do. It's clever, that little bit of white there. . . . Nice shoes you have . . . lovely hair. I wonder . . .'

She broke off, staring at Millie. 'Why, of course! You're the girl Peter's in love with.'

'Me!'

'Yes, you. Of course I discovered after I'd been back an hour that there was somebody. Peter isn't so subtle but that you can't find out what he's thinking. Besides, I knew him twenty years ago and he hasn't changed as much as I have. *You're* the girl! Well, I'm not sorry. I did him an injury twenty years ago, more or less ruined his life for him, and I won't be sorry to do him a good turn before I go. You won't have long to wait, my dear. I was very nearly finished last night, if you want to know. I can tell you a few things about Peter that it will be good for you to understand if you're going to live with him.'

'Oh, but you're wrong! You're entirely wrong!' cried Millie. 'I'm sure Peter doesn't love me, and even if he did—anyway, I don't love him. I was engaged until a few days ago. It has just been broken off—some one I loved very much. That's the trouble I spoke about just now.'

'Tell me about it,' said Clare, looking at her with eyes half-closed.

'Oh, but you wouldn't—it isn't——'

'Yes, I would. . . . Yes, it is. . . . Remember there's nothing about men I don't know. You look so young: you can't know very much. Perhaps I can help you.'

'No,' said Millie, shaking her head. 'You can't help me. No one can help me but myself. It's all over—quite, quite over.'

'What did he do, the young man?'

'We were engaged six months ago. Meanwhile he was really engaged to another girl in his own village. She is going to have a baby this month—his baby. I didn't know of this. He never would

have told me if some one hadn't gone to his village and found it all out.'

'Some one? Who? A woman?'

'Yes. She thought she was helping me.'

'Are you sure it's true?'

'Yes. He admitted it himself.'

'Hum. Were you very much in love with him?'

'Yes, terribly.'

'No, not terribly, my dear, or you'd have gone off with him whatever happened. Do you love him still?'

'I don't know. He doesn't seem to belong to me any more. It was knowing that he wasn't going to help that poor girl about her baby that came right down between us. That was cruel, and cruelty's worse than anything. He could have been cruel to me—he was sometimes, and I dare-say I was to him. People generally are when they are in love with one another. But that poor girl——'

'Never mind that poor girl. We don't know how much of it was her doing. Perhaps she's not going to have a baby at all. Anyway, it may not be his baby. No, if you'd been really in love with him you'd have gone down to that village and found it all out for yourself, the exact truth. And then, probably you'd have married him even if it had been true. . . . Oh yes, you would. My dear, you're too young to know anything about love yet. Now tell me—weren't you feeling very uncertain about it all long before this happened?'

'I had some miserable times.'

'Yes, more and more miserable as time went

on. But not so miserable as they are now. I know. But what you're feeling now is loneliness. And soon you'll not be lonely with your prettiness and health and love of life.'

'Oh, you're wrong! you're wrong!' cried Millie. 'You are indeed. Love is over for me. I'm never going to think of it again. That part of my life's done.'

Clare smiled. 'Good God, how young you are!' she said. 'I was like that myself once, another life, another world. But I was never like you, never lovely as you are. I was pretty in a commonplace kind of way. Pretty enough to turn poor Peter's head. That's about all. Now listen, and I'll tell you a little about myself. Would you like to hear it?'

'Yes,' said Millie.

The memory came to her of Peter telling her this same story; for a flashing second she saw him standing beside her, the look that he gave her. Was she not glad now that he loved her?

Clare began: 'I was the daughter of a London doctor — an only child. My parents spoilt me terribly, and I thought I was wonderful, clever, and beautiful and everything. Of course, I always meant to be married, and there were several young men I was considering, and then Peter came along. He had just published his first book and it was a great success. Every one was talking about it. He was better-looking then than he is now, not so fat, and he had a romantic history—starving in the slums and some one discovered him and just saved his life. He was wildly in love with me. I thought he was going to be great and famous, and I liked the idea of being the wife of a famous

man. And then for a moment, perhaps, I really was in love with him, physically, you know. And I knew nothing about life, nothing whatever. I thought it would be always comfortable and safe, that I should have my way in everything as I always had done. Well, we were married, and it went wrong from the beginning. Peter knew nothing about women at all. He had strange friends whom I couldn't bear. Then I had a child and that frightened me. Then he got on badly with mother, who was always interfering. Then the other books weren't as successful as the first, and I thought he ought to give me more good times and grudged the hours he spent over his work. Then our boy died and the last link between us seemed to be broken. . . . Well, to cut a long story short, his best friend came along and made love to me, and I ran off with him to Paris.'

'Oh!' Millie cried, 'poor Peter!'

'Yes, and poor me too, although you may not believe it. I only ran off with him because I hated my London life so and hated Peter and wanted some one to make a fuss of me. I hadn't been in Paris a week before I knew my mistake. Never run off with a man you're not married to, my dear, if you're under thirty. You're simply asking for it. He was disappointed too, I suppose—at any rate after about six months of it he left me on some excuse and went off to the East. I wasn't sorry; I was thinking of Peter again and I'd have gone back to him, I believe, if my mother hadn't prevented me. . . . Well, I lived with her in Paris for two years and then—and then—Maurice appeared.'

She stopped, closing her eyes, lying back against

the cushions, her hand on her heart. She shook her head when Millie wanted to fetch somebody.

At last she went on : 'No, let's have this time alone together. It may be the only time we'll get . . . Maurice . . . yes. That was love, if you like. Didn't I know the difference? You bet! He was a French poet! Funny! two writers, Peter and Maurice, when I myself hadn't the brain of a snail. But Maurice didn't care about my brain. I don't know what he did care about—but I gave him the best I had. He was married already of course, and so was I, but we went off together and travelled. He had some money—not very much, but enough—and things I wouldn't have endured for Peter's sake I adored for Maurice's.

'We settled down finally in Spain and had three divine years. Then Maurice fell ill, money ran short, I fell ill, everything went wrong. But never our love—that never changed, never faltered. We quarrelled sometimes, of course, but even in the middle of the worst of our fights we knew that it wasn't serious, that really nothing *could* separate us but death—for once that sentimental phrase was justified. Well, death *did*. Two months before the War he died. My mother had died the year before, and as I learnt later my father two years before. But I didn't care what happened to me. When real love has come to you once and then has been taken away from you, then you *do* know what loneliness means. The War gave me something to do, but my heart was all wrong. I fell ill again in Paris, was all alone, tried to die and couldn't, tried to live and couldn't. . . . We won't talk about that time if you don't mind.

'I had often thought of Peter, of course. I felt

guilty about him as about nothing else in my life. He was so young when I married him, such an infant, so absurdly romantic ; I spoilt everything for him as I couldn't have spoilt it for most men. He is such a child still. That's why you ought to marry him, my dear, because you're such a child too. And your brother—infants all three of you. I used to think of returning to him. I myself was romantic enough to think that he might still be in love with me, and although I was much too tired to care for any one again, the thought of some one caring for me again was pleasant. Twice I nearly hunted him out. Once hunger almost drove me, but I tried not to go for that reason, having, you see, still a scrap of sentiment about me. Then a man who'd been very good to me but at last couldn't stand my moods and tantrums any longer left me—small blame to him ! —and I gathered my last few coppers together and came to Peter. I nearly died on his doorstep—now instead I'm going to die inside. It's warmer and more comfortable.'

'No, no, no, you're not !' cried Millie. 'You're going to live. Peter and I will see to it. We're going to make you live.'

Clare frowned.

'Don't be sentimental, my dear. Face facts. It would be extremely tiresome for you if I lived. You may not be in love with Peter but you like him very much, and there'll be nothing more awkward for you than having a sick woman lying round here——'

Millie broke in :

'There you're wrong ! you're wrong indeed ! I'd love to make you well. It isn't sentiment. It's truth. How have I dared to tell you about my

silly little affair when you've suffered as you have! How selfish I am and egoistic—give me a chance to help you and I'll show you what I can do.'

Clare shook her head again. 'Well, then,' she said, 'if I can't put you off that way I'll put you off another. You'd bore me in a week, you and Peter. I've been with bad people so long that I find good ones very tiresome. Mother was bad. That's a terrible thing to say about your mother, isn't it?—but it's true. And I've got a bad strain from her. You're a nice girl and beautiful to look at, but you're too English for me. I should feel as though you were District Visiting when you came to see me. Just as I feel about Peter when he drops his voice and walks so heavily on tiptoe and looks at me with such anxious eyes. No, my dear, I've told you all this because I want you to make it up to Peter when I've gone. You're ideally suited to one another. When I look at him I feel as though I'd been torturing one of those white mice we used to keep at school. I'm not for you and you're not for me. My game's finished. I'll give you my blessing and depart.'

Millie flushed and answered slowly: 'How do you know I'm so good? How do you know I know nothing about life? Perhaps I *have* deceived myself over this love affair. It was my first: I gave him all I could. Perhaps you're right. If I'd loved him more I'd have given him everything. . . . But I don't know. Is it being a district visitor to respect yourself and him? Is the body more important than anything else? I don't call myself good. . . . I don't call you bad. It's only the different values we put on things.'

Clare looked at her curiously. 'Perhaps you're

right,' she said. 'Physical love, when that's all there is, is terribly disappointing—an awful sell. I could have been a friend of yours if I'd been younger. There! Get up a moment—stand over there. I want to look at you!'

Millie got up, crossed the room and stood, her arms at her side, her eyes gravely watching.

Clare sat up, leaning on her elbow. 'Yes, you're lovely. Men will be crazy about you—you'd better marry Peter quickly. And you're fine too. There's spirit in you. Move your arm. So! Now turn your head. . . . Ah, that's good! That's *good*! . . .'

She suddenly turned, buried her face in the cushions and burst into tears. Millie ran across to her and put her arms round her. Clare lay for a moment, her body shaken with sobs. Then she pushed her away.

'No, no. I don't want petting. It's only—what it all might have been. You're so young: it's all before you. It's over for me—over, over!'

She gave her one more long look.

'Now go,' she said, 'go quickly—or I shall want to poison you. Leave me alone——'

Millie took her hat and coat and went out into the rain.

CHAPTER VI

CLARE GOES

THAT night Clare died.

Peter slept always now in the sitting-room with the door open lest she should need anything. He was tired that night, exhausted with struggles of conscience, battles of the flesh, forebodings of the future ; he slept heavily without dreams. When at seven in the morning he came to see whether she were awake, he found her, staring ironically in front of her, dead.

Heart failure, the doctor afterwards said. He had told Peter, days before, that veronal and other things were old friends of hers. To-day no sign of them. Nevertheless . . . had she assisted herself a little along the inevitable road ? Before he left her the evening before, she had talked to him. He was often afterwards to see her, sitting up on the sofa, her yellow hair piled untidily on her head, her face like the mask of a tired child, her eyes angry as always.

' Well, Peter,' she had said, ' so you're in love with that girl ? '

He admitted it at once, standing stolidly in front of her, looking at her with that pity in his eyes that irritated her so desperately.

'Yes, I love her,' he said, 'but she doesn't love me. When you're better we'll go away and live somewhere else. Paris, if you like. We'll make a better thing of it, Clare, than we did the first time.'

'Very magnanimous,' she answered him. 'But don't be too sure that she doesn't love you. Or she will when she's recovered from this present little affair. You must marry her, Peter—and if you do you'll make a success of it. She's the honestest woman I've met yet, and you're the honestest man I know. You'll suit one another. . . . Mind you, I don't mean that as a compliment. People as honest as you two are tiresome for ordinary folks to live with. I found you tiresome twenty years ago, Peter, I find you tiresome still.'

He suddenly came down and knelt beside her sofa, putting his arm round her. 'Clare, please, please don't talk like that. My life's with you now. I daresay you find me dull. I am dull I know. But I'm old enough to understand now that you must have your freedom. All that I care about is for you to get well; then you shall do as you like. I won't tie you in any way, only be there if you want a friend.'

She suddenly put up her hand and stroked his cheek, then as suddenly withdrew her hand and tucked it under her.

'Poor Peter,' she said. 'It was bad luck my coming back like that, just when she'd broken with her young man. Never mind. I'll see what I can do. I did you a bad turn once—it would be nice and Christian of me to do you a good turn now. We ought never to have married, of course—but you *would* marry me, you know.'

She looked at him curiously, as though she were seeing him for the first time.

'What do you think about life, Peter? What does it mean to you, all this fuss and agitation?'

'Mean?' he repeated. 'Oh, I don't know.'

'Yes, you do,' she answered him. 'I know exactly what you think. You think it's for us all to get better in. To learn from experience, a kind of boarding-school before the next world.'

'Well, I suppose I do think it's something of that sort,' he answered. 'It hasn't any meaning for me otherwise. It feels like a fight and a fight about something real.'

'And what about the people who get worse instead of better? It's rather hard luck on them. It isn't their fault half the time.'

'We don't see the thing as it really is, I expect,' he answered her, 'nor people as they really are.'

She moved restlessly.

'Now we're getting preachy. I expect you get preachy rather easily, just as you used to. All I know is that I'm tired—tired to death. Do you remember how frightened I used to be twenty years ago? Well, I'm not frightened any longer. There's nothing left to be frightened of. Nothing could be worse than what I've had already. But I'm tired—damnably, damnably tired. And now I think I'll just turn over and go to sleep if you'll leave me for a bit.'

He kissed her and left her, and at some moment between then and the morning she left him.

CHAPTER VII

THE RESCUE

At the very moment that Millie was knocking on Peter's door Henry was sitting, a large bump on his forehead, looking at a dirty piece of paper. Only yesterday he had fought Baxter in Piccadilly Circus ; now Baxter and everything and every one about him was as far from his consciousness as Heaven was from 1920 London. The Real had departed — the coloured life of the imaginations had taken its place. . . . The appeal for which all his life he had been waiting had come—it was contained in that same dirty piece of paper.

The piece of paper was of the blue-grey kind, torn in haste from a washing bill ; the cheap envelope that had contained it lay at Henry's feet.

On the piece of paper in a childish hand was scrawled this ill-spelt message : ' Please come as quikley as you can or it will be to late.'

Mr. King's factotum, a long thin young man with carroty hair, had brought the envelope five minutes before. The St. James's church clock had just struck five ; it was raining hard, the water running from the eaves above Henry's attic window across and down with a curious little gurgling

chuckle that was all his life afterwards to be connected with this evening.

There was no signature to the paper ; he had never seen Christina's handwriting before ; it might be a blind or a decoy, or simply a practical joke. Nevertheless, he did not for a moment hesitate as to what he would do. He had already that afternoon decided in the empty melancholy of the deserted Hill Street library that he must that same evening make another attack on Peter Street. He was determined that this time he would discover once and for all the truth about Christina even though he had to wring Mrs. Jenssen's skinny neck to secure it.

He had returned to Panton Street fired with this resolve ; five minutes later the note had been delivered to him.

He washed his face, put on a clean collar, placed the note carefully in his pocket-book, and started out on the great adventure of his life. The rain was driving so lustily down Peter Street that no one was about. He moved like a man in a dream, driven by some fantastic force of his imagination as though he were still sitting in Panton Street and this were a new chapter that he was writing in his romance—or as though his body were in Panton Street and it was his soul that sallied forth. And yet the details about Mrs. Jenssen were real enough —he could still hear her crunching the sardine-bones, and Peter Street was real enough, and the rain as it trickled inside his collar, and the bump on his forehead.

Nevertheless in dreams, too, details were real.

As though he had done all this before (having as it were rehearsed it somewhere), he did not this

time go to the little door but went rather to the yard that had seen his first attack. He stumbled in the dusk over boxes, planks of wood and pieces of iron, hoops and wheels and bars.

Once he almost fell, and the noise that he made seemed to his anxious ears terrific, but suddenly he stumbled against the little wooden stair, set his foot thereon and started to climb. Soon he felt the trap-door, pushed it up with his hand, and climbed into the passage. Once more he was in the gallery, and once more he had looked through into the courtyard beyond, now striped and misted with the driving rain.

No human being was to be seen or heard. He moved, indeed, as in a dream. He was now by the long window, curtained as before. This time no voices came from the other side ; there was no sound in all the world but the rain.

Again, as in dreams, he knew what would happen : that he would push at the window, find it on this occasion fastened, push again with his elbow, then with both hands shove against the glass. All this he did, the doors of the window sprang apart, and it was only with the greatest difficulty that he saved himself from falling on to his knees as he had done on the earlier occasion.

He parted the curtains and walked into the room. He found a group staring towards the window. At the table, her hands folded in front of her, sat Christina, wearing the hat with the scarlet feather as she had done the first time he had seen her. On a chair sat Mrs. Jenssen, dressed for a journey ; she had obviously been bending over a large bag that she was trying to close when the noise that Henry made at the window diverted her.

Near the door, his face puckered with alarm, a soft grey hat on his head and very elegant brown gloves on his hands, was old Mr. Leishman.

Henry, without looking at the two of them, went up to Christina and said :

'I came at once.'

Mrs. Jenssen, her face a dusty chalk-colour with anger, jumped up and moved forward as though she were going to attack Henry with her nails. Leishman murmured something. With great difficulty she restrained herself, paused where she was, and then in her favourite attitude, standing her hands on her hips, cried :

'Then it is jail for you after all, young man. In two minutes we'll have the police here, and we'll see what you have to say then to a charge of house-breaking.'

'See, Henry,' said Christina, speaking quickly, 'this is why I have sent for you. My uncle has come to London at last and is to be here to-morrow morning to see us. My mother says I am to go with her now into the country to some house of his,' nodding with her head towards Leishman, 'and I refuse and——'

'Yes,' screamed Mrs. Jenssen, 'but you'll be in that cab in the next ten minutes or I'll make it the worse for you and that swollen-faced schoolboy there.' There followed then such a torrent of the basest abuse and insult that suddenly Henry was at her, catching her around the throat and crying, 'You say that of her ! You dare to say that of her ! You dare to say that of her ! '

This was the third physical encounter of Henry's during the months of this most eventful year : it was certainly the most confused of the three. He

felt Mrs. Jenssen's finger-nails in his face and was then aware that she had escaped from him, had snatched the pin from her hat and was about to charge him with it. He turned, caught Christina by the arm, moved as though he would go to the window, then, as both Mrs. Jenssen and Leishman rushed in that direction, pushed Christina through the door, crying, 'Quick! Down the stairs! I'll follow you!'

As soon as he saw that she was through he stood with his back to the door facing them. Again the dream-sensation was upon him. He had the impression that when just now he had attacked Mrs. Jenssen his hands had gone through her as though she had been air.

He could hear Leishman quavering: 'Let them go. . . . This will be bad for us. . . . I didn't want . . . I don't like . . .'

Mrs. Jenssen said nothing, then she had rushed across at him, had one hand on his shoulder and with the other was jabbing at him with the hat-pin, crying, 'Give me my daughter! Give me my daughter! Give me my daughter!'

With one hand he held off her arm, then with a sudden wrench he was free of her, pushing her back with a sharp jerk, was through the door and down the stairs.

Christina was waiting for him; he caught her hand and together they ran through the rain-driven street.

Down Peter Street they ran and down Shaftesbury Avenue, across the Circus, and did not stop until they were inside Panton Street door. The storm had emptied the street, but, maybe, there are those alive who can tell how once two figures flew

through the London air, borne on the very wings of the wind. . . . In such a vision do the miracles of this world and the next have their birth!

Up the stairs, through the door, the key turned, the attic warm and safe about them, and at last Henry, breathless, his coat torn, his back to the door:

'Now nobody shall take you! . . . Nobody in all the world!'

CHAPTER VIII

THE MOMENT

THE miracle had been achieved. She was sitting upon his bed, her hands in her lap, looking with curiosity about her. She was very calm and quiet, as she always was, but she suddenly turned and smiled at him as though she would say, 'I do like you for having brought me here.'

His happiness almost choked him, but he was determined to be severely practical. He found out from her the name of her uncle and the hotel at which he was staying. He wrote a few lines saying that Miss Christina Jenssen was here in his room, that it was urgently necessary that she should be fetched by her uncle as soon as possible for reasons that he, Henry, would explain later. He got Christina herself to write a line at the bottom of the page.

'You see, if we went on to your uncle's hotel now at once, he might not be in and we should not be able to go up to his room. It is much better that we should stay here. Your mother may come on here, but they shall only take you from this room over my dead body.' He laughed. 'That's a phrase,' he said, 'that comes naturally to me because I'm a romantic novelist. Nevertheless, this

time it's true. All the most absurd things become true at such a time as this. If you knew what nights and days I've dreamt of you being just like this, sitting alone with me like this. . . . Oh, Gimini ! I'm happy. . . .' He pressed the bell that here rang and there did not. For the first time in history (but was not to-day a fairy tale ?) the carroty-haired factotum arrived with marvellous promptitude, quite breathless with unwonted exertion. Henry gave him the note. He looked for an instant at Christina, then stumbled away.

'If your uncle is in, he should be here in half an hour. If he is out, of course it will be longer. At least I have half an hour. For half an hour you are my guest in my own palace, and for anything in the world that you require I have only to clap my hands and it shall be brought to you !'

'I don't want anything,' she said; 'only to sit here and be quiet and talk to you.' She took off her hat, and it reposed with its scarlet feather on Henry's rickety table.

She looked about her, smiling at everything. 'I like it all—everything. That picture—those books. It is so like you—even the carpet !'

'Won't you lie down on the bed ?' he said. 'And I'll sit here, quite close, where I can see you. And I'll take your hand if you don't mind. I suppose we shan't meet again for a long time, and then we shall be so old that it will all be quite different. I shall never have a moment like this again, and I want to make the very most of it and then remember every instant so long as I live !'

She lay down as he had asked her and her hand was in his.

'You don't know what it is,' she said, 'to be

away from that place at last. All this fortnight my mother has been hesitating what she was to do. She has been trying to persuade Leishman to take me away himself, but there has been some trouble about money. There has been some other man too. All she has wanted lately is to get the money; she has wanted, I know, to leave the country—she has been cursing this town every minute—but she was always bargaining for me and could not get quite what she wanted. Then suddenly only this morning she had a letter from my uncle to say that he had arrived. She is more afraid of him than of any one in the world. She and the old man have been quarrelling all the morning, but at last they came to some decision. We were to leave for somewhere by the six o'clock train. She had hardly for a moment her eyes off me, but I had just a minute when I could give that note to Rose, the girl who comes in in the morning to work for us. I was frightened that you might not be here, away from London, but it was all I could do. . . . I was happy when I saw you come.'

'This is the top moment of my life,' said Henry, 'and for ever afterwards I'm going to judge life by this. Just for half an hour you are mine and I am yours, and I can imagine to myself that I have only to say the word and I can carry you off to some island where no one can touch you and where we shall be always together.'

'Perhaps that's true,' she said, suddenly looking at him. 'I have never liked any one as I like you. My father and my uncles were quite different. If you took me away who knows what would come?'

He shook his head, smiling at her. 'No, my dear. You're grateful just now and you feel kind, but you're not in love with me and you never never will be. I'm not the man you'll be in love with. He'll be some one fine, not ugly and clumsy and untidy like me. I can see him—one of your own people, very handsome and strong and brave. I'm not brave and I'm certainly not handsome. I lose my temper and then do things on the spur of the moment—generally ludicrous things—but I'm not really brave. But I believe in life now. I know what it can do and what it can bring, and no one can take that away from me.'

'I believe,' she said, looking at him, 'that you're going to do fine things—write great books or lead men to do great deeds. I shall be so proud when I hear men speaking your name and praising you. I shall say to myself, "That's my friend whom they're speaking of. I knew him before they did and I knew what he would do."'

'I think,' said Henry, 'that I always knew that this moment would come. When I was a boy in the country and was always being scolded for something I did wrong or stupidly, I used to dream of this. I thought it would come in the War, but it didn't. And then when I was in London I would stop sometimes in the street and expect the heavens to open and some miracle to happen. And now the miracle *has* happened, because I love you and you are my friend, and you are here in my shabby room, and no one can ever prevent us thinking of one another till we die.'

'I shall always think of you,' she answered, 'and how good you have been to me. I long for home and Kjöbenhavn and Langlinie and Jutland

and the sand-dunes, but I shall miss you—now I know how I shall miss you. Henry, come back with me—if only for a little while. Come and stay with my uncle, and see our life and what kind of people we are.'

His hand shook as it held hers. He stayed looking at her, their eyes lost in one another. It seemed to him an eternity while he waited. Then he shook his head.

'No. . . . It may be cowardice. . . . I don't know. But I don't want to spoil this. It's perfect as it is. I want you always to think about me as you do now. You wouldn't perhaps when you knew me better. You don't see me as I really am, not all the way round. For once I know where to stop, how to keep it perfect. Christina, darling, I love you, love you, love you! I'll never love any one like this again. Let me put my arms around you and hold you just once before you go.'

He knelt on the floor beside her bed and put his arms around her. Her cheek was against his. She put up her hand and stroked his hair.

They stayed there in silence and without moving, their hearts beating together.

There was a knock on the door.

'Give me something,' he said. 'Something of yours before you go. The scarlet feather!'

She tore it from her hat and gave it to him. Then he went to the door and opened it.

CHAPTER IX

THE UNKNOWN WARRIOR

It was the morning of November 11, 1920, the anniversary of the Armistice, the day of the burial of the Unknown Warrior.

Millie, who was to watch the procession with Henry, was having breakfast with Victoria in her bedroom. Last night Victoria had given a dinner-party to celebrate her engagement, and she had insisted that Millie should sleep there—'the party would be late, a little dancing afterwards, and no one is so important for the success of the whole affair as you are, my Millie.'

Victoria, sitting up in her four-poster in a lace cap and purple kimono, was very fine indeed. She felt fine; she held an imaginary reception, feeling, she told Millie, exactly like Teresia Tallien, whose life she had just been reading, so she said to Millie.

'Not at all the person to feel like,' said Millie, 'just before you're married.'

'If you're virtuous,' said Victoria, 'and are never likely to be anything else to the end of your days, it is rather a luxury to imagine yourself grand and beautiful and wicked.'

'You'd have got on very badly with Tallien,' said

Millie, 'and you wouldn't have liked Barras any better.'

'Well, I needn't worry about it,' said Victoria, 'because I've got Mereward, who is quite another sort of man.' She drank her tea, and then reflectively added: 'Do you realise, Millie darling, that you've stuck to me a whole eight months, and that we're more "stuck," so to speak, than we were at the beginning?'

'Is that very marvellous?' asked Millie.

'Marvellous! Why, of course it is! You don't realise how many I had before you came. The longest any one stayed was a fortnight.'

'I've very nearly departed on one or two occasions,' said Millie.

'Yes, I know you have.' Victoria settled herself luxuriously. 'Just give me that paper, darling, before you go and some of the letters. Pick out the nicest ones. You've seen me, dear, at a most turbulent point of my existence, but I'm safely in harbour now, and even if it seems a little dull I daresay I shall be able to scrape up a quarrel or two with Mereward before long.' Millie gave her the papers; she caught her hand. 'You've been happier these last few weeks, dear, haven't you? I'd hate to think that you're still worrying. . . . That—that man. . . .' She paused.

'Oh, you needn't be afraid to speak of him.' Millie sat down on the edge of the bed. 'I don't know whether I'm happier exactly, but I'm quiet again—and that seems to be almost all I care about now. It's curious though how life arranges things for you. I don't think that I would ever have come out of that miserable loneliness if I hadn't met some one—a woman—whose case was far far worse than

mine. There's always some one deeper down, I expect, however deep one gets. She took me out of myself. I seem somehow suddenly to have grown up. Do you know, Victoria, when I look back to that first day that I came here I see myself as such a child that I wonder I went out alone.'

Victoria nodded her head.

'Yes, you are older. You've grown into a woman in these months ; we've all noticed it.'

Millie got up. She stretched out her arms, laughing. 'Oh ! life's wonderful ! How any one can be bored I can't think. The things that go on and the people and these wonderful times ! Bunny hasn't killed any of that for me. He's increased it, I think. I see now what things other people have to stand. That woman, Victoria, that I spoke of just now, her life ! Why, I'm only at the beginning —at the beginning of myself, at the beginning of the world, at the beginning of everything ! What a time to be alive in ! '

Victoria sighed. 'When you talk like that, dear, and look like that it makes me wish I wasn't going to marry Mereward. It's like closing a door. But the enchantment is over for me. Money can't bring it back nor love—not when the youth's gone. Hold on to it, Millie—your youth, my dear. Some people keep it for ever. I think you will.'

Millie came and flung her arms round Victoria.

'You've been a dear to me, you have. Don't think I didn't notice how good and quiet you were when all that trouble with Bunny was going on. . . . I love you and wish you the happiest married life any woman could ever have.'

A tear trickled down Victoria's fat cheek. 'Stay with me, Millie, until you're married. Don't leave

us. We shall need your youth and loveliness to lighten us all up. Promise.'

And Millie promised.

In the hall she met Ellen.

'Ellen, come with my brother and me to see the procession.'

Ellen regarded her darkly.

'No, thank you,' she said.

Then as she was turning away, 'Have you forgiven me?'

'Forgiven you?'

'Yes, for what I did. Finding out about Mr. Baxter.'

'There was nothing to forgive,' said Millie. 'You did what you thought was right.'

'Right!' answered Ellen. 'Always people like you are thinking of what is right. I did what I wanted to because I wanted to.' She came close to Millie. 'I'm glad, though, I saved you. You've been kind to me after your own lights. It isn't your fault that you don't understand me. I only want you to promise me one thing. If you're ever grateful to me for what I did be kind to the next misshapen creature you come across. Be tolerant. There's more in the world than your healthy mind will ever realise.' She went slowly up the stairs and out of the girl's sight.

Millie soon forgot her; meeting Henry at Panton Street, pointing out to him that to-day he must wear a black tie, discussing the best place for the procession, all these things were more important than Ellen.

Just before they left the room she looked at him. 'Henry,' she said, 'what's happened to you?'

'Happened?' he asked.

'Yes. You're looking as though you'd just received a thousand pounds from a noble publisher for your first book—both solemn and sanctified.'

'I'll tell you all about it one day,' he said. He told her something then, of the rescue, the staying of Christina in his room, the arrival of the uncle.

He spoke of it all lightly. 'He was a nice fellow,' he said, 'like a pirate. He said the mother wouldn't trouble us again, and she hasn't. He carried Christina off to his hotel. He asked me to dinner then, but I didn't go . . . yes, and they left for Denmark two days later. . . . No, I didn't see them off. I didn't see them again.'

Millie looked in her brother's eyes and asked no more questions. But Henry had grown in stature; he was hobbledehoy no longer. More than ever they needed one another now, and more than ever they were independent of all the world.

They found a place in the crowd just inside the Admiralty Arch. It was a lovely autumn day, the sunlight soft and mellow, the grey patterns of the Arch rising gently into the blue, the people stretched like long black shadows beneath the walls.

When the procession came there was reverence and true pathos. For a moment the complexities, turmoils, selfishnesses, struggles that the War had brought in its train were drawn into one simple issue, one straightforward emotion. Men might say that that emotion was sentimental, but nothing so sincerely felt by so many millions of simple people could be called by that name. The coffin passed with the admirals and the generals; there was a pause and then the crowd broke into the released space, voices were raised, there was laughter and shouting, every one pushing here and there, multi-

tudes trying to escape from the uneasy emotion that had for a moment caught them, multitudes too remembering some one lost for a moment but loved for ever, typified by that coffin, that tin hat, that little wailing tune.

Millie's hand was through Henry's arm. 'Wait a moment,' she said. 'There'll be the pause at eleven o'clock. Let's stay here and listen for it.'

They stood on the curb while the crowd, noisy, cheerful, exaggerated, swirled back and forwards around them. Suddenly eleven o'clock boomed from Big Ben. Before the strokes were completed there was utter silence; as though a sign had flashed from the sky, the waters of the world were frozen into ice. The omnibuses in Trafalgar Square stayed where they were; every man stood, his hat in his hand. The women held their children with a warning clasp. The pigeons around the Arch rose fluttering and crying into the air, the only sound in all the world. The two minutes seemed eternal. Tears came into Millie's eyes, hesitated, then rolled down her cheeks. For that instant it seemed that the solution of the earth's trouble must be so simple. All men drawn together like this by some common impulse that they all could understand, that they would all obey, that would force them to forget their individual selfishnesses, but would leave them, in their love for one another, individuals as they had never been before. 'Oh! it can come! It *must* come!' Millie's heart whispered. 'God grant that I may live until that day.'

The moment was over; the world went on again, but there were many there who would remember.

CHAPTER X

THE BEGINNING

They were to lunch with Peter in Marylebone. Millie had some commission to execute for Victoria and told Henry that she would meet him in Peter's room.

When she was gone he felt for a moment lost. He had been in truth dreaming ever since that last sight of Christina. He had no impulse to follow her—he knew that in that he had been wise—but he was busy enthroning her so that she would always remain with every detail of every incident connected with her until he died.

In this perhaps he was sentimental ; nevertheless clearer-sighted than you would suppose. He knew that he had all his life before him, that many would come into it and would go out of it again, that there would be passions and desires satisfied and unsatisfied. But he also knew that nothing again would have in it quite the unselfish devotion of his passion for Christina. The first love is not the only love, but it is often the only love into which self does not enter.

His feet led him to Peter Street. The barrows were there with their apples and oranges and old clothes and boots and shoes and gimcrack china.

The old woman with the teary eye was there, the policeman good-humouredly watching. It was all as it had been on that first afternoon now so long, long, long ago !

Henry looked at the yard, at the little blistered door, at the balcony. No sign of life in any of them.

The Peter Street romance had just begun, but it had passed away from Peter Street.

He walked to Marylebone in a dream, and when he was there he had to pull himself together to listen with sympathy to Peter's excitement about this new monthly paper of which Peter was to be editor, the paper that was to transform the world.

He left Peter and Millie talking at the table, went to the window and looked out. As he saw the people passing up and down below them of a sudden he loved them all.

The events of the last month came crowding to him—everything that had happened : the first sight of Christina in the Circus, the first visit to Duncombe, the Hill Street library and his love for it, his interviews with Mrs. Jenssen, the day when he had given Christina luncheon in the little Spanish restaurant, Duncombe and the garden and Lady Bell-Hall, his struggles with his novel, his recovery of the old Edinburgh life, Sir Walter and his smile, the row with Tom Duncombe, the meals and the theatres and the talks with Peter, Millie's trouble and Peter's wife, his fight with Baxter, Duncombe's last talk with him and his death, the last time with Christina, to-day's Unknown Warrior—yes, and smaller things than these: sunsets and sunrises, people passing in the street, the wind in the Duncombe orchard, books new and old, his little room in Panton Street, the vista of Piccadilly Circus on

a sunlit afternoon, all London, and beyond it England whom he loved so passionately, and beyond her the world to its furthest and darkest fastnesses. What a time to be alive, what a time to be young in, the enchantment, the miraculous enchantment of life!

'*I am he attesting sympathy (shall I make my list of things in the house and skip the house that supports them?).*

'*I am not the poet of goodness only, I do not decline to be the poet of wickedness also.*

. . . . . .

'*My gait is no fault-finder's or rejecter's gait, I moisten the roots of all that has grown.*

. . . . . .

'*This minute that comes to me over the past decillions.*

'*There is no better than it and now. What behaved well in the past or behaves well to-day is not such a wonder.*

'*The wonder is always and always how there can be a mean man or an infidel.*'

He turned round to speak to Peter, then saw that he had his hand on Millie's shoulder, she seated at the table, looking up and smiling at him.

Millie and Peter? Why not? Only that would be needed to complete his happiness, his wonderful, miraculous happiness.

THE END

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